



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

**Jeanne S. Chall Collection  
on the Teaching of Reading**

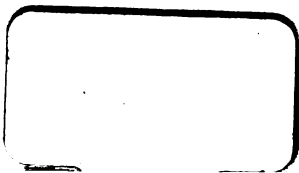


---

**HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

---

**MONROE C. GUTMAN  
LIBRARY**



52

JEANNE S. CHAL



3 2044 102 787 736

HOW TO READ



# HOW TO READ

BY  
J. B. KERFOOT

---

---

"Reading is a form of living"

---

---



BOSTON AND NEW YORK  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
*The Riverside Press Cambridge*

Chall. Coll.

PN

82

.1-4

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
MONROE C. GUMANN LIBRARY

**COPYRIGHT, 1916, BY JOHN B. KERFOOT**

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

*Published October 1916*

**The Riverside Press**  
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS  
PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

22

Alfred Stieglitz





## CONTENTS

I. LEARNING TO READ . . . . .	I
II. MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY . .	29
III. WATCHING THE WHEELS GO ROUND .	53
IV. WHAT 'S THE USE . . . . .	88
V. A SENSE OF DIRECTION . . . . .	112
VI. THE WORLD OUTSIDE US AND THE WORLD WITHIN . . . . .	148
VII. INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION . . . .	192
VIII. HOW TO READ A NOVEL . . . .	221
IX. THE COSMOS À LA CARTE . . . .	265



# ❧ HOW TO READ ❧

## CHAPTER I LEARNING TO READ

### I

A FEW months ago I happened to be present at a dinner where a chance question led to an interesting talk. Some phase of primary education was under discussion; and in the course of it the host, turning to one of the guests, asked, "When did *you* learn to read?"

"At three," was the prompt reply, given with a touch of pride.

"And you?" said the host to the next guest.

"Oh, I don't know. About five, I suppose."

"And you?" to a lady beyond.

There was a moment's embarrassed hesitation. And then, with something about scarlet fever, came the confession that she had not learned her letters till she was nine.

And thus it went, halfway round the table.

### I

## HOW TO READ

Now these replies were direct and pertinent. They were categorical answers to a technical question. Taken separately, they gave the exact information asked for.

And yet, as they piled up, one after the other, there seemed to be something about them that I found myself vaguely resenting.

It was not what they said. It was, rather, a discernible common denominator of implication in their manner of saying it.

It seemed as though these people were leaving out of account all the other-than-technical meanings of the phrase with which they dealt, not because they were consciously excluding these deeper meanings for the moment, but because they unconsciously ignored them at all times.

There was a cumulative inflection of finality in their declarations. It almost sounded as though, in dealing with the primary-school meaning of "learning to read," they felt that they had dealt with the *whole* meaning of that expression. And while it never entered my head at the moment that this was really true, the fact that it was somehow being made to appear true struck me as amusing. It struck

## LEARNING TO READ

me as amusing enough to call attention to. And so, presently, when the host asked me when *I* had learned to read, I answered with a smile that I was still learning.

And to my utter astonishment it developed, in the chaffing and talk that followed, that no single member of that largely literary and more or less intellectual company had ever thought of the expression "learning to read" as *having* any other meaning than the technical, primary-school meaning; that, namely, of learning the alphabet, learning to recognize words made out of the alphabet, learning the dictionary meanings of more, and more, and still more words, and thus learning to *receive messages sent by print or handwriting*.

No one of them, it turned out, had ever asked himself what it is, exactly, that we do when we read. No one of them had ever watched himself in the act of reading. And all of them, in consequence, had retained intact the careless assumption that reading is essentially a *receptive* process. They all looked upon it, let us say, as though print were a sort of silent telephone, into one end of which an author delivers a message, and from the

## HOW TO READ

other end of which (by simply "knowing how to read") his audience receives it.

Now, as a matter of fact, and as we shall see presently, this is not true at all. It is not even an inadequate statement of the facts; it is a misstatement of them. And when I had pointed out something of this, — when I had, hurriedly, and to the poor best of my surprised unpreparedness, mobilized a few arguments and illustrations in defense of what I had regarded as a neutralized axiom, — we began, in the course of the give-and-take of the talk that followed, to make discoveries. And we continued, excitedly and joyously, to make them until 1 A.M.

We discovered that the common-school definition of "learning to read" is so universally accepted as the whole definition, that, while almost every newspaper and magazine publishes regular articles on *what* to read, none of them, so far as any of us knew, ever publishes articles on *how* to read. We discovered that, while there is a whole literature of books about books, — about what books it behooves us to read, and why it behooves us to read them, and what (according to the

## LEARNING TO READ

author) it behooves us to read into them, — there is little or nothing in the whole literature about literature that tells us anything at all about how we *have* to read books and what it is that we *have* to read into them. We discovered — But, enough! What we are here concerned with is the last discovery that we made; the discovery upon which, so to say, the inquiry culminated and broke up; the discovery that I have tried to summarize in a sentence on the title-page of this book.

We discovered that reading, so far from being a merely receptive act, is a creative process. That it is “creative,” not simply in the more or less cant-sodden “artistic” sense, but in a biologic sense as well. That it is an active, largely automatic, purely personal, constructive functioning. That it is, indeed, a species of anabolism. In short, that it is *a form of living*. And as this last expression will be found, as we proceed, progressively to absorb and adequately to sum up the essence of our successive conclusions, I will put it that it is this last “discovery” — the discovery of reading as a form of living — that I propose to examine and hope to elucidate in the following pages.

## HOW TO READ

And now, having said this much by way of introduction; having, as it were, established a mental take-off; let us, like sensible swimmers, dive at once into the deepest pool that our preliminary subject affords.

### II

Until ten or twelve years ago, no man who ever lived could tell another man a story.

I am sorry to begin by making so obviously idiotic a statement. But I have two excuses for doing so. One (which I merely mention in passing) is that the statement is literally true. The other (upon which I want to lay all possible emphasis) is that the trueness of this truth is of the essence of our inquiry.

Allow me, therefore, to repeat the statement.

From the beginning of time, right down until about ten years ago, no man ever lived who could tell another man a story. Moses could n't, Homer could n't. Chaucer could n't. The minstrels and minnesingers could n't. Dante could n't. Dickens could n't. Even Conan Doyle could n't.

The best that the very best of them ever



## LEARNING TO READ

succeeded in doing was to trick, or to coax, or to compel their readers or their hearers into *telling stories to themselves*.

"Pshaw!" you are very likely going to exclaim at this point. "Here is a man pretending to explain one idiotic statement by making another." And perhaps it does look that way. But, before we continue the discussion, let us take a few minutes off and go to the movies.

### III

That stirring photo-play, "The Two Rattlesnakes," is on the bill.

We scuttle down the darkened aisle and slip into some vacant seats near the front.

There is a little hissing splutter overhead: A flickering green frame, with "JIM MEETS A RATTLER" inside it, springs into view on the dim curtain. And a moment later the entire audience, and we with them, have settled down into an eager, yet perfectly passive, receptivity, and are looking (through a hole in the darkness) at the arid slope of an Arizona sheep-ranch, where a cowboy with a lamb in his arms and an old ewe at his heels is picking his way down the rocky and cactus-grown

## HOW TO READ

hillside. On he comes, twisting and turning; near enough now for us to see the liteness of his limbs and his cheery eyes. Then, suddenly, there is a blur of motion at his feet. A snaky something launches its length and strikes for a second at his knee. Bewilderment, horror, realization, chase each other across his face. We see him drop the lamb; snatch out a knife; rip away the cloth; slash the naked flesh; bend to suck the poison from the wound. We watch him make a tortion bandage from the kerchief at his neck. We watch him start, limping, down the hill. We watch him waver, and stumble, and stop to rest with his hand on a boulder. We watch him press on; and fall; and get up; and struggle on again. We see him fall, and fail to rise. We see him, with a last spurt of strength, pull his six-shooter from its holster; fire three slow shots in the air; and drop back into unconsciousness. And we see a little cloud of distant dust turn into the mounted figures of his friends; see them ride furiously up; leap to the ground; gather round him; examine his hurt; lift his inert body to a horse's back, and ride away — just as the hole in the darkness disappears and

## LEARNING TO READ

we find ourselves back again in the dim-lit, crowded hall.

Now it would be nice to sit out the show. To see how "MOLLIE GETS THE NEWS" — Mollie in her Harlem flat; with her sleeves rolled up above her plump forearms; interrupted in the act of touching a moist finger to a hot iron by the coming of a telegram — "Jim bitten by a rattler. Come at once." To see her drag a chair to the corner cupboard; take down the old teapot; empty its contents on the ironing-board; stuff the money into her purse; put on her wraps and go. To see her, in the next reel, poring over time-tables in an emigrant sleeper; while the other rattlesnake — a human one — watches her from across the aisle. To see him scrape acquaintance with her; learn her story; get out maps; offer suggestions; finally send a telegram of his own — "Meet me at Dry Gulch with the buckboard." To see her whisked behind fast horses to the cattle-thieves' camp. To see the cowboy raid; the timely rescue; the ride to the ranch; the reunited lovers. To see the human rattler tied hand and foot and tossed (on the same hillside that Jim came down

## HOW TO READ

in the beginning) into the center of a grim-faced circle and within reach of a coiled something that writhes, and springs, and dashes obscene fangs against his contorted face.

But we have n't time for that. We must get back to our discussion. Let us slip out quietly while the hall is dark.

### IV

Do you happen to know how the movies are made?

They begin, like any other piece of fiction, in the mind of a man who has *told himself a story*. Having done so, he undertakes, by means of a short piece of descriptive writing (called a scenario) to guide the imagination of his readers along the road his own imagination has followed. And this scenario is submitted to a movie-manager, who, if he likes it, buys it and turns it over to his producing department.

Now the producing department of a moving-picture concern is a remarkable establishment. It has a long list of actors at its beck and call. It has storehouses full of stage prop-

## LEARNING TO READ

erties. It has clothes-presses full of costumes. It has a card index of "likely places." It has a corps of mechanics to do its bidding. And when the scenario of an author's story is turned over to the directing intelligence of this establishment, he chooses actors for it from his troupe. He supplies them with costumes from his cupboards. He draws stage properties from his stores. He selects scenes from his card index. He has his mechanics provide effects that are not in stock. And finally, before the recording eye of the camera, he proceeds — well or ill according to his ability and his resources — to *re-tell the author's story in the concrete terms of his own equipment.*

And for us who sit in the audience his re-telling — his reading of the story — is final. *You* may know a hillside far more picturesque than the one *Jim* comes down. But you cannot substitute it, in your mind, for the movie-man's hillside. *I* may know a girl a dozen times more Molly-ish than the *Mollie* of the film. But I cannot cast her for *Mollie's* part in "The Two Rattlesnakes." The movie-man is reading the author's story, not we.

## HOW TO READ

For the moment he stands, like St. Peter, at the gates of our imaginations. What he chooses is chosen. What he puts in is in. What he leaves out is out.

He is the first man who has told another man a story since the world began.

"But," you are perhaps exclaiming, "how then about the others? How about Virgil? And Cervantes? And Balzac? And — Marie Corelli?"

Every one of them, from the least to the greatest, has but written for the movies.

Not for the movies of the photo-theater, but for the movies of our minds.

For a novel is nothing but an elaborate scenario. And each of us is a moving-picture concern.

When we examine a book at a bookstore; when we look at the opening sentences, and read a snatch of conversation on page 247, and turn back to the last page to see how it all ends, — a scenario has been submitted to the manager. When we pay down our \$1.35, or present our library card to be stamped, — we have purchased the local rights in it. And when we switch on our

## LEARNING TO READ

electric reading-lamp, and stretch out in our favorite chair, and open the book at the first chapter, — we turn the tale over to our producing department.

And the producing department of a human moving-picture concern is also a remarkable establishment.

All the people we have ever known, plus thousands we have spoken to, or crossed eyes with in a crowd, or watched in public places, or merely glimpsed in passing, are actors at its beck and call. And it can, moreover, pick and choose, not only among these actors, but among their attributes. It can, and that in the twinkling of an eye, take a chance expression on the face of one's best friend, the body of a blacksmith seen years since at a country crossroad, the mustache of yesterday's organ-grinder, and the eyes of last year's cotillion leader, and cast the composite of them (together with the composite suggestion of personality that results) as the villain of a piece.

It, too, has memory storehouses full of stage properties; mental cupboards crammed with costumes; a brain-cell index of likely

## HOW TO READ

places. It, too, has a marvelous mechanic, called Imagination, that contrives effects that are not in stock out of odds and ends of raw material.

And when a story-teller's scenario is submitted to it, the directing mind of this establishment — contriving, as they are needed, actors from this troupe; stage properties from these stores; costumes from these cupboards; scenes from this cell catalogue — proceeds, paragraph by paragraph and page by page, before the estimating eye of our intelligence, and well or ill according to its ability and its resources, to *re-tell the author's story in the recollective and imaginative and emotional terms of its own equipment.*

### V

Do you, by any chance, doubt this?

If so, I have a confession to make. I have, deliberately and with malice aforethought, deceived you. The photo-play performance of "The Two Rattlesnakes" never took place. *There never has been such a photo-play.*

I made that all up "as I went along," as the children say. And I placed before you,



## LEARNING TO READ

not a story, but only the skeleton of a story — the merest dry bones of a half-finished scenario.

Yet I'll warrant that in reading it you pictured to yourself a *Jim* of your own fancying, walking down a hillside of your own invention. That you contrived a *Mollie* to your own liking and placed her in a flat of your own furnishing. That at the last you invested the horrid death of the villain with emotions dictated by your own temperament. That you either exulted in a punishment that so poetically fitted the crime, or shuddered to see men, made in God's image, capable of such horrors.

Is it not so?

Moreover, when you stop to consider it, you will see that this cannot be otherwise.

The terms of one's own equipment are the only terms in which a story *can* reach us.

For the heroine that the author imagined is forever invisible to us, no matter how minutely he describes her. And though his scene for the moment be Chicago, and though we chance to live there, it is in *our* Chicago, and not in his, that we stage that chapter of his

## HOW TO READ

tale. Indeed, if he describes a character *too* minutely, — if he keeps our minds too long from imagining their own protagonists in the effort to imagine his, — our minds end by shrugging their shoulders, going on strike, and refusing to imagine *any*. And it is for the same reason that we so often skip elaborate descriptions of scenery, and that meticulously word-painted landscapes commonly prove invisible to the eyes of our imaginations.

Nor is it alone to the things of the senses that this inexorable law applies. It is the same with less tangible stage properties. When we are called upon to “register” horror, we have only our own brands of that emotion to register. When a mental attitude is asked of us, we can but place our own minds, like lay figures, in, or somewhere near, the posture demanded. And if the specifications of our author’s scenario include a spiritual reaction, we must either supply it, or a substitute for it, from the laboratory of our own spirit, or else pass on, saying in effect (as the motion-picture man would say in the vernacular), “Kill that soul stuff!”

## LEARNING TO READ

### VI

But let us go back for a moment to that beginning which we have skipped. Let us go back to the nursery and to our own "learning to read."

Let us suppose that you have just mastered your letters (or, if you happen to belong to the later order, that you have not mastered them) and that you are about to receive your first lesson in reading.

A book is placed before you, open at the first page.

On this page is the woodcut of an animal. And below that are the mystic hieroglyphics, SEE THE CAT.

Do you see what has happened?

Do you perceive the significance — the practical symbolism — of this performance? Do you see that at the very threshold of "learning to read," even in the restricted, common-school sense of learning to interpret an arbitrary code of black marks on white paper, there has been placed before you, as a symbol of what you are to do, *the moving picture reduced to its simplest form*? Do you see

## HOW TO READ

that in effect, and by the silent pantomime of that juxtaposition, they are saying to you, "Visualize, darn you!"?

But perhaps you will balk at this interpretation.

Let us, therefore, suppose again.

Let us suppose that there is no house cat in your home.

Let us suppose that the weeks have gone by and that you have learned to read many pages in your picture primer; and that one fine morning, on a pictureless page in another book, you come across again those now familiar characters, SEE THE CAT.

What happens now?

Why, instantly and inevitably you *visualize the woodcut*.

Why? Because it is the only cat you have in stock; and so, willy-nilly, you cast it for the hero of the sentence. You have, in short, on a ridiculously inadequate capital, begun your own career as a moving-picture concern.

Let us pursue the inquiry.

Let us suppose that you go for a few weeks' visit to some cousins in the country, and that one of them has a Maltese kitten.

## LEARNING TO READ

And let us suppose that on your return, fearing perhaps that you had forgotten your lessons, they put that old primer in your hand, open at the first page.

What happens this time?

Do you accept the woodcut?

Not you. As you take in the words **SEE THE CAT**, your mind presents you, unasked, the picture of a blue-gray kitten, the extreme tip of its tail twitching back and forth above the grass, and one curved paw tapping a red apple just fallen in the orchard. And with this picture comes a swift sense of soft winds; and just a taste of cider.

You have, you see, increased the capital of your moving-picture establishment and are already exercising your prerogatives as a producing manager. You have just rejected with scorn the illustrator's offer to supply your equipment. You are *telling the author's story yourself*.

### VII

And now I think that we are ready to sum up.

Or, shall we put it that we have now

## HOW TO READ

acquired the equipment necessary to read what follows? For that, after all, is what we really mean.

We read, then, quite literally, with our own experience. We read with what we have seen and heard and smelled and tasted and felt. We read with the emotions we have had — with the love we have loved, the fear we have feared, the hate we have hated. We read with the observations we have made and the deductions we have drawn from them; with the ideas we have evolved and the ideals we have built into them; with the sympathies we have developed and the prejudices we have failed to rid ourselves of.

“Learning to read” in the common-school sense — learning, let us put it, to *read print* and learning to *read handwriting* — has exactly as much (and exactly as little) to do with our reading of a novel as it has with Forbes-Robertson’s “reading” of Shakespeare.

Learning to read, in the real sense, means enlarging our equipment, and learning, creatively, to use it.

We *receive* in reading; but we receive, not

## LEARNING TO READ

directly by what the author tells us, but indirectly, by the new uses that he stimulates us into putting our experience to.

For reading consists of our making — with the aid of the pattern and the hints supplied by the author, but out of *our* mental stock, which we have produced by living — something that never existed before; something that only exists at all in so far as we make it; something that can never be duplicated by any other reader; something that we ourselves can never wholly reproduce.

Reading is a copartnership. What we receive from it is in the nature of dividends on a joint investment.

### VIII

“Yes,” I seem to hear some one saying, “this is very interesting and quite true — about fiction. But how about a philosophic treatise? How about an abstract sociological argument? How about a discussion of scientific principles?”

It is all quite as true of these kinds of reading as it is of a novel, or of a magazine story, or of a newspaper account of a fire.

## HOW TO READ

You can no more put a new idea into a person's head than you can tell him a story. All that you can do is to stimulate him into making new combinations out of the ideas already there.

"But how, then," I seem to hear the same objector saying, "do new ideas get into people's heads, if you cannot put them there?"

The answer to this is *Topsy's*: They grow.

I recall the tale of a servant who was a most dependable agent for doing anything that she had once been shown how to do, but who (or so her bachelor employer thought) had never had an original idea in her head since she was born. But it happened that one of her acquired accomplishments was the making of ice-cream. And one hot day in summer, when a thunderstorm had unexpectedly sent the mercury tumbling down into the sixties, he was suddenly confronted, not only with a squat figure standing in his study door, but with the complete destruction of his theory.

"Say!" his servant was saying, "if I turn the handle backward will it unfreeze the cream?"



## LEARNING TO READ

### IX

The truth is that our heads house other industries beside that of moving-picture making. And one of these is a distillery.

Here the raw materials of crude experience — like, say, the jerking of a burned finger out of the flame — are treated by a secret process and “ideas” — like the idea that fire is hot — are extracted from them. You cannot, as most of us know from experience, put the idea that fire is hot into a child’s head. *The best that you can do is to supervise the delivery of the raw experience at the gate of the distillery.*

But we are more than distillers of low-grade ideas — of these comparatively crude, first-hand realizations.

We are blenders and rectifiers of these as well.

We combine two or more of them and from the mixture we distill a sublimated extract — the idea, say, of a resemblance. We combine a number of these ideas of resemblance and from the blend distill a still more rarefied essence — the idea, say, of a generalization. And each of these ideas — each of these home-

## HOW TO READ

made products of our distillery — becomes a permanent item of our stock in trade. Each of them is, so to say, stored away in its own bottle, ready for use in our further experiments.

And these further experiments — these combinings of ideas that we have in stock — are by no means always made on our own initiative. They are often — more often than otherwise — made on order, or by suggestion.

Smith meets Jones in the subway and they have a little chat.

Later, Smith says to his wife, “Keen chap, that Jones. He gave me a new idea to-day.”

But of course he did n’t.

What Jones gave him was a formula.

He suggested that if Smith would take some of the Idea in Bottle 68, and some of the Idea in Bottle 7042, and mix them, he’d get such and such a result. And Smith did. And he got it.

But, *suppose Smith had n’t had the ingredients in stock?*

### x

Let us take our own case.

When you began this chapter, you quite

## LEARNING TO READ

definitely did n't have in your head several ideas that are now there.

You did n't, for instance, have in your head the idea that authors do not tell us stories; that they only issue instructions to us for telling ourselves stories; that they only write "scenarios" for us to "produce."

How, then, did this idea get into your head?

Not, certainly, by my putting it there.

If you are inclined, for the moment, to think that I did this, you have only to turn back to section 11 of this chapter in order to see how you felt toward *it*, and what you thought of *me*, when I pretended to think that I *could* put this idea into your head.

No. I did n't put it there. I could n't.

All that I could do was to furnish you, in the proper order, the various formulæ needed for distilling it; to see that you were supplied, on occasion, with certain necessary raw materials; and to stimulate you, from time to time, to make certain combinations out of these ingredients.

I knew, for instance, that you were going to need the idea that there were two meanings to the expression "learning to read"; and I

## HOW TO READ

was afraid that you might not have this idea in stock. So I suggested that you take a number of ideas that I knew you *could* supply from stock — the ideas of an inquisitorial host; of a series of guests, each of whom thought in his own way that he had learned to read, once for all, when he was a child; and of one guest who thought that he had n't — I suggested that you take these simple ideas and mix them in a certain way. And you did as I suggested and got the desired result — the more complex idea.

And I took pains to “stimulate you into making this new combination of ideas that were already on hand.”

That was a part of my job as author.

I did it, in this case, by inducing you to dramatize the ideas; by inducing you to imagine people holding these ideas, or enacting them. In fine, I did it by *inventing this dinner party*; which, like the photo-play of “The Two Rattlesnakes,” never took place.

But the dinner party and the photo-play were invented for entirely different reasons. In the latter case I knew that you were going to need the idea that *we read in terms of our*

## LEARNING TO READ

*own equipment and not in terms of the author's equipment;* and I was also afraid that you did not have this idea in stock.

But this is an idea that is not easily derivable from the mixing of other, simpler ideas. This is an idea that we get best first-hand, from experience — by actually doing the thing and watching ourselves do it. It is practically one of those realization-ideas, like the idea that fire is hot. Its extreme complexity is due to the extreme complexity of the experience itself.

So I took measures to supply you with the experience.

I wrote a scenario and I tricked you into "producing" it.

And then, while the experience was fresh in your mind, I called your attention to what you had done.

### XI

Philosophy or fiction, then, it is all one.

Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" is as much a scenario as is Stevenson's "Treasure Island." They merely call for different equipments to "produce" them.

## HOW TO READ

Reading either of them is a partnership transaction between the author and ourselves.

And in either case our dividends will depend upon (1) the amount of our contributed capital; and (2) upon the number and the nature of the "turn-overs" we are stimulated into making with it.

## CHAPTER II

### MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

#### I

Looking up at my calendar as I begin this chapter, I notice that I have an engagement to-night. I am going to the theater.

I also notice that it is the first of April. And I wonder, in passing, whether this is a coincidence, or whether there is also a divinity that guides our beginnings, rough-hew them as we will. At any rate, the day is well lit upon. To talk of the dictionary on April Fools' Day is as appropriate as to wear green on the seven-teenth of March.

However, let us get back to my engagement.

The play we are going to see has made a great hit. We had to get tickets weeks in advance. The house will be packed to the roof.

Suppose I jump up on my seat in the middle of the third act and shout "FIRE!!"

What does your imagination suggest as the result?

Panic?

## HOW TO READ

Stampede?

Women trampled?

Clothes torn from men's backs?

Five or six hundred well-fed, well-dressed, outwardly kindly folk, suddenly swept by a brain-storm of herd-horror; and then, quiet, and a few still bodies sprawled in the empty aisles?

Probably.

And what would have been responsible for all this?

Terror. Instant, unreasoned, irresistible terror.

And what would have caused this terror?

An idea.

And what would have detonated this idea, like a bomb, in five hundred minds at once?

A shouted word.

Surely, this must be a very terrible word?

A word with a most immemorial, definite, terror-striking meaning?

## II

But hold on a minute.

It happens that Jim Sedgworth dined with me last night.



## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

You don't know Jim. But he is one of those big, blue-eyed, absent-minded, intensely-in-earnest fellows, whose greatest joy in life is to pounce on an idea and worry it. Jim treats an idea exactly as though he were a bull pup and it were the corner of a sofa cushion.

Well, when we'd finished dinner, and I had given Jim a cigar, and he'd cut the end off of it; I saw, by the way he searched his pockets, and by the puzzled frown between his eyes as he talked (he had just gotten an idea by the ear and was beginning to growl at it), that he had left his matches at home. So I caught the butler's eye; and he, presently, brought a little alcohol lamp and stood at Jim's side with it.

But Jim had his idea by the throat by then and did n't notice.

"Fire, Sir," said the man.

Jim paid no attention. And yet, curiously enough, I noticed that his hand stopped groping in his pockets.

"Fire, Sir," said the butler, again, a little louder.

Jim did n't seem to notice, even yet. He did n't start. He did n't look round and say, "Oh — yes — thank you." He went right on

## HOW TO READ

talking. He gave his idea a final shake. He disdainfully tossed the carcass of it on to the table between us, as who should say, "Resuscitate *that* if you can." And then, his eyes fixed on mine, he leaned a little sideways toward the lamp. The frown disappeared from his forehead. With his eyes still on mine, he stuck the end of his cigar into the little blue flame. And he puffed.

Now what caused Jim to stop groping for matches?

What gradually wiped the perplexed frown from his face?

What caused him, while his real attention was fixed on his argument and his eyes on me, to avail himself of the proffered lamp?

Let us put it that these things were the result of a slowly dawning sense of a need about to be supplied.

And what caused this sense of approaching satisfaction?

The gradual taking form of a vague idea in the back of his mind.

And what was it that prompted the slow generation of this idea in his half-consciousness?

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

A repeated word.

Surely, this must be a most reassuring word? A word with an age-old, ingratiating, domestic significance?

### III

But hold on again!

IT IS THE SAME WORD!

Or, are we mixing things up?

Are these, perhaps, two different words that happen to be spelled alike?

Or are they the same word, used in two different senses?

Let us consult the dictionary.

### IV

On second thought, however, and while the dictionary is being gotten down from the shelf for us, let me tell you what it is that I want to show you.

We made, in the last chapter, some rather startling discoveries.

We discovered, for instance, that authors do not, because they cannot, tell us stories or put new ideas into our heads. That they merely guide and prompt us, with varying

## HOW TO READ

skill and effectiveness, in telling stories, and in building up ideas, for ourselves.

We discovered that books are, in reality, nothing but more-or-less elaborate scenarios — descriptions of the stories or syntheses that their authors want us to stage in our minds; and that the only material we have to draw upon for the “producing” of these scenarios is our own experience — the stored products of the living we have done.

In fact, we discovered that reading, instead of being the comparatively passive and essentially receptive process that we are in the habit of considering it, is in reality an intensely personal and creative activity.

We are, we found, astonishingly “on our own” when we read a book.

But we have not, even yet, pushed our investigations in this regard quite home.

We have not, even yet, discovered how *much* “on our own” we really are when we read.

For story scenarios are written in words. And while we have discovered where we get our stories, we have yet to discover where we get our word-meanings.

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

We have discovered that no man can tell us a story.

We have yet to realize that no man can tell us the meaning of a word.

### V

"What!" you are, of course, going to exclaim at this point, "and how, then, about the dictionary?"

Allow me to be as shocking as possible. *The dictionary is the very LAST place in which you will find this information.*

However, don't think for a moment that I expect you to take my word for this. I quite realize that you do not believe me. But fortunately, and just in the nick of time, here comes the dictionary to speak for itself.

Here is FUNK AND WAGNALL'S NEW STANDARD DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. Let us resume our interrupted investigation by seeing what it has to tell us.

### VI

We were wanting to know whether the word "fire" as supposedly shouted in the theater, and the word "fire" as spoken to Jim

## HOW TO READ

Sedgworth by the butler, were perhaps two different words that happened to be spelled alike.

The dictionary tells us that the word "fire" only occurs twice in English; once as a verb, and once as a noun. And as both of these words, as used, are nouns, they must necessarily be the same word, used in different senses.

At least one would suppose so. \*

Let us see, however, what the dictionary has to say.

The dictionary gives fourteen or fifteen different meanings for the noun "fire" and divides these into six groups. Here they are:—

- FIRE.** (1) The evolution of heat and light by combustion; also, the combustion thus manifested, especially the flame, or the fuel as burning.
- (2) The discharge of firearms; firing.
- (3) One or more sparks, especially as emitted by iron or stone when struck by a substance hard enough to tear it.
- (4) Any light, luster, or flash resembling fire.
- (5) Liveliness or intensity of thought, feeling, or action; ardor; passion; vivacity.
- (6) Any raging evil; a severe affliction; sore trial; as, the fires of persecution.

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

Well?

This does n't seem to help us much, does it?

There is manifestly but one of these meanings — but one of these fourteen or fifteen meanings divided into six groups — that in any remotest degree connects itself with my supposed cry in the theater.

This is the last meaning in the first group:—

the combustion thus manifested, especially  
the flame, or the fuel as burning.

And there is but one of these meanings — but one of these fourteen or fifteen meanings divided into six groups — that in any remotest degree connects itself with the butler's proffer of the cigar-lighter.

Namely, the last meaning in the first group:—

the combustion thus manifested, especially  
the flame, or the fuel as burning.

But, these are not different meanings!

THESE ARE THE SAME MEANING!

And not only that.

This "dictionary meaning" does not, in either case, indicate in the remotest degree

## HOW TO READ

the meaning actually conveyed by the word as used.

Jim Sedgworth certainly could n't have gotten *his* meaning of the word as used by the butler from the dictionary.

The theater audience to-night, should I shout that word from my seat during the third act, certainly would n't get *its* meaning of it from the dictionary.

Evidently, if we have nowhere to go for our word-meanings except to the dictionary, we are up a tree.

### VII

As a matter of fact, however, we are merely up against two very interesting questions: —

(1) Where *do* we get the meanings of words?

(2) What *is* the function of the dictionary?

Let us tackle the latter question first. And, to that end, let us begin by setting down, as clearly as we can, the meanings actually conveyed by the word "fire" as used in these two cases.

Let us put it that the meaning conveyed to an audience by the word "FIRE!" shouted in a theater would be something like this: —



## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

The frightful Theater-fire-death is upon us! We are trapped! Every man for himself!

And let us put it that the meaning actually conveyed to Jim Sedgworth by "Fire, Sir," as spoken by the butler, was something like this:—

Sir, give over groping and frowning; the slight fire-service that you require is here at your elbow.

If, now that we have them before us, we compare these two meanings; if we examine them carefully, but with an eye to resemblances rather than to differences; we shall find that they have one, and only one, element in common. In each the *fire-notion* is present.

And if we now turn back to that vague "dictionary meaning" of the noun "fire," which, of all the "dictionary meanings" given, we found to be the only one remotely connectible with either of these cases, and equally connectible with each of them; namely, —

the combustion thus manifested, especially the flame, or the fuel as burning, —

## HOW TO READ

we shall discover that it is, in reality, nothing but *a definition of this fire-notion*.

Suppose, now, with this discovery in our minds, we reëxamine the six groups of meanings given by the dictionary for the noun "fire."

We shall find that they can be described, and summed up, as follows: —

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| (1) The evolution of heat and light by combustion; also the combustion thus manifested, especially the flame, or the fuel as burning. | Definitions of the general fire-notion.                                    |
| (2) The discharge of firearms; firing.  | A definition of the shooting-iron fire-notion.                             |
| (3) One or more sparks, especially as emitted by iron or stone when struck by a substance hard enough to tear it.                     | A definition of the flint-and-steel, or horse-shoe-and-cobble fire-notion. |
| (4) Any light, luster, or flash resembling fire.  | Definitions of the looks-like-fire-to-the-eye notion.                      |

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>(5) Liveliness or intensity of thought, feeling or action; ardor; passion; vivacity.</p> | <p>Definitions of the make-a-you-think-of-fire notion.</p>               |
| <p>(6) Any raging evil; a severe affliction; sore trial; as, the fires of persecution.</p>  | <p>Definitions of the make-a-you-think-of-the-effect-of-fire notion.</p> |

In fine, we have hit upon the function of the dictionary; which is, not to give us the definite meanings of words as used, but to *define the root-ideas; the type-notions; the lowest common denominators of grouped meanings; for which words, by long usage and slow development, have come to stand.*

And this, as we shall see more clearly in a few moments, cannot, in the nature of things, be otherwise. For words, in themselves, — words, that is to say, without context, — do not possess definite meanings. They merely stand for generalized ideas. They are magic formulæ — rubbed lamps — “Open Sesames!” — by which we command the presence of “notions” in one another’s minds.

## HOW TO READ

### VIII

It is possible that at first blush you doubt my soundness in making this statement. If so, I can refer you to the dictionary itself. For the dictionary knows this fact perfectly, — or, rather, partially, — but, for reasons of its own, does n't force it on our notice. It prints it, in very small type, in a dark corner where you will be unlikely to come across it; but where, if accused of not knowing its own business, it could triumphantly point it out. On page 2730 of the New Standard Dictionary, tucked away among some other comments on the word "word," appears the following: —

In human language, all words, except proper names and some exclamations, are signs of generalized ideas, called notions.

Please bear this statement of the dictionary's in mind. We will have occasion to refer to it later on.

### IX

And now for our other question: where *do* we get the meanings of words as actually used?

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

We have already, as it happens, stumbled on the answer to this question also. We get the meanings of words, as actually used, from the context.

The matter, however, is not quite so simple as this sounds. Let us look at it a bit more closely.

Suppose I say to you, "I am going down town to get a down pillow."

My meaning, because of the context, is perfectly clear to you in spite of the two "downs."

Or you would probably say so.

But, is it?

Do you, as a matter of fact, know what "down town" means to me? Do I know what it means to you? Do we understand the same thing, all the way through, by "down pillow"? Or does "down pillow," possibly, mean to you an aid to luxurious ease? To me, as it happens, it means a squashy nuisance that is forever shedding white fuzz on the back of my coat.

In short, *are the other words the whole of the context?*

Let us see for ourselves.

## HOW TO READ

Let us return for a moment to the crowded theater.

Here we had a single word, shouted by itself. Whence do these five hundred people get, at the same instant, the same meaning from this word? *Not* from the verbal context, since there is none. They get it from the material context:—from the big, crowded house, and the small, distant exits; from their common knowledge of the horrors of theater fires; from the context, in short, of the shared situation.

But even this is not all.

Up to a certain point — to the exact point up to which the situation is really shared — these people get a practically identical meaning from the shouted word. But each of them gets, also, a more definite meaning yet; a personal meaning.

The little lady in G 34 gets the meaning that two babies at home will be motherless if she does n't somehow get out before the rush.

The big man in B, next seat but one to the aisle, gets the meaning that he must manhandle the flabby fellow at his right in order to get started while the going is good.

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

The fireman near the main exit gets the meaning that now at last he is "on duty" in deadly earnest.

And so on, and so forth, through five hundred variations.

In fact, the personal character and the private concerns of every man and woman in that theater are, for him or her self but for no one else, a part of the context.

We ourselves, our endowments and derivations, our past performances and present entanglements, in fine, the sum total of living that we have stored in us, are always and always, forever and ever, a part of the context from which we derive the meaning of every word that we hear spoken or read in print.

### X

"Learning to read," therefore, does not only mean increasing our stored experience, physical, mental, and spiritual; and learning to draw on these stores more and more skillfully for the "producing" of our authors' scenarios. It means, also, enlarging our "personal contexts"; developing our responsiveness to "verbal contexts"; and learning to

## HOW TO READ

draw more and more discriminatingly on these two sources for *the word-meanings in which we interpret the directions that our successive partners, the authors, issue to us.*

### XI

This, dramatically considered, would appear to be the proper place to ring down the curtain on this chapter. But before doing this I want to be certain that you realize the absolute universality of the explanation above set forth.

I chose the word "fire" to use as an illustration because it seemed convenient. But I might have chosen any one of the 349,999 other words in the New Standard Dictionary. For they all, without exception, stand, in their respective degrees, for "generalized ideas called notions"; and it is invariably from the contexts — verbal, situational, personal — that we derive the specific meanings which, in actual use, we individually assign to them.

But I have more than a suspicion that you are still inclined to question this. You are, I dare swear, bursting at this very moment



## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

with suggested exceptions. You are, I am certain, feeling around with the fingers of your mind for words — words that you *know* must exist — whose meanings are singular and absolute.

Well, there are no such words.

Not in practice at any rate.

I defy you to find one, inside the dictionary or out.

For they exist only in theory. And, even there, they are hard birds to get hold of. The only way to catch one is to put salt on its tail — the intellectual salt called metaphysics.

### XII

“But,” you are doubtless wanting to remind me, “the dictionary itself expressly says that ‘In human language, all words, *except proper names and some exclamations*, are signs of generalized ideas called notions.’”

Exactly. But, let me remind you in turn, we are engaged in muckraking the dictionary. And the dictionary is either less practically perspicacious than it thinks itself, or less intellectually honest than it pretends to be, in making this statement.

## HOW TO READ

It either fails to realize that it is talking common sense in the unitalicized portion of the quoted sentence, and metaphysics in the italicized portion; or else it deliberately abandons, in practice, the double standard that it sets up in theory. For no one can detect the alleged difference of status between these classes of words by examining the text of the dictionary.

Let us try for ourselves.

Let us look up a proper name in the New Standard Dictionary (where proper names are listed, in ordinary alphabetical order, in the text); and then take the next, ordinary, word in the column; and compare the two. Suppose we take "Aristotle." The next word after "Aristotle" is "aristotype." Here is what the dictionary says about them:—

**Aristotle.** A Greek philosopher (384-322 B.C.); pupil of Plato; teacher of Alexander the Great.

**Aristotype.** *Phot.* A print made on paper treated as with mixed collodion and gelatin, capable of receiving a high polish.

Well? How about it? Now that you have read what the dictionary has to say, is "aris-

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

totype" a "notion" to you and "Aristotle" not?

Or, as a matter of cold, practical fact, is not your notion of "Aristotle" just as generalized as it was before consulting the dictionary, while your notion of "aristotype" has become a trifle more specific than formerly?

### XIII

But perhaps you think that Aristotle is not a fair selection. He has been dead such a long time that our notions of him are naturally hazy.

Let us get into the twentieth century: into the lime-light.

Let us put it that proper names run all the way from "John Doe," which stands, by definition, for a generalized idea, to "Teddy Roosevelt," which stands, let us say, for

A type of human being of which, "more's the pity," or "thank God!" (according to our personal contexts) there happens to be but one.

Dr. Woods Hutchinson pointed out, some years ago, that "night air" was the only kind of air we have to breathe — at night. I

## HOW TO READ

would respectfully point out that a generalized idea is the only idea we have, either of Mr. Aristotle or Mr. Roosevelt, and that "Aristotle" and "Teddy Roosevelt" stand for them.

Words, after all, are but push-buttons. When we press them, they call up notions in other minds. When I push the button "Teddy," it calls up a notion of Teddy in your mind. It does n't call up my notion of him. It does n't call up his notion of himself. It calls up that generalization which, at the moment, stands for your notion of him.

### XIV

So much, then, for proper names. As for "some exclamations," the dictionary defines "O" as "an exclamation of lamentation."

It defines "Oh" as "a natural ejaculation evoked by sudden surprise."

It defines "Ah" as "an exclamation expressing various emotions according" — in short, according to the context.

And so on through the list. In short, it defines these words as standing for ideas that are merely a little more generalized than the

## MUCKRAKING THE DICTIONARY

others. One can, for instance, imagine a fat and very self-satisfied dictionary exclaiming, "O!" or "Oh!!" or "Pshaw!" or even "Ouch!" as these little mistakes are pointed out to it.

You will find it an amusing game and a helpful exercise to take a list of words, — any words, like "spirituality," "toward," "humble," "angrily," "diphthong," "potato," "Aristophanes," "Humph!" — and satisfy yourself in each case of the relevancy of the facts set forth.

You will find that they are all — nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, proper names, exclamations, what-not — you will find that they are all "signs" alike; all signals, rubbed lamps, mental push-buttons.

You will find that, as any one of them is presented to you, a "notion" springs up in your mind.

You will find that, while these notions differ in degree of vagueness (your "Humph!" notion will be vaguer than your "Aristophanes" notion, which, in turn, will be vaguer than your "potato" notion), each of them

## HOW TO READ

will prove, on examination, to be a “generalized idea.”

And you will find, finally, that each of these ideas is *a generalization made from your own stored-up experience.*

## CHAPTER III

### WATCHING THE WHEELS GO ROUND

#### I

It is not customary for authors to print their prefatory remarks at the beginning of the third chapter. But this, for reasons that will presently appear, is what I am about to do.

The object of this book, briefly stated, is to help its readers to a more intelligent employment of reading for their own individual ends — whatever those may be.

But since this object, thus summarized, will seem to many to imply the setting forth of some definitely formulated technique, — of a specific formula that needs only to be followed, — there are no doubt those who are already looking to see this book's instructions summed up for them in a set of cut-out-able, pin-up-able, memorizable, and try-it-on-a-dog-able rules. They are looking, let us say, for something analogous to those lists of instructions commonly furnished us in treatises on "How to Grow Thin": — so many of such

## HOW TO READ

and such stoopings and flexings before the morning tub; so many miles at a brisk walk after breakfast; so and so many tens and twenties and fifties of such and such rollings and toe-touchings before getting into bed; supplemented by carefully worked-out menus of what we may, and carefully compiled lists of what we may not, eat.

If, however (from the personal contexts of your own preconceptions and desires), you have read any such expectation out of the title of this volume, it is only right that I should, in advance, disabuse your mind of the false hope.

I do not propose to tell you that you must always, in reading, let the light fall on your book from behind, over your shoulder; that you should avoid stories of thrilling adventure and should pick out theological essays when you are trying to read yourself to sleep o' nights: that half an hour, morning and evening, is all that you ought to devote to the daily papers; and that you should keep a small edition of the classics in your coat pocket to read while you are waiting in line at the box office of the movie-theater. I am not even going



## WATCHING THE WHEELS

to divulge to you that legendary secret of the professional "reader," — that sea serpent among trade tricks, — by which it is said that the initiated are enabled to take in whole paragraphs and even whole pages of print at a glance; instead of plodding along, sentence by sentence, after the manner of the untaught.

This volume, in short, contains no royal road to learning — not even learning to read. *It contains a scenario which you, as my partner of the moment, are invited to "produce" — the scenario of an inquiry, leading to conclusions.*

If you are inclined to protest that such a scenario must necessarily be lacking in excitement and essentially undramatic, I can only assure you that you are wrong. An inquiry is first cousin to a detective story. A conclusion may be the most thrilling of dénouements. And no scenario of exploration, not even one that leads us to the sources of the Orinoco or lands us in the heart of Thibet, can be fuller of adventure, and more fraught with surprises and flavored with the wine of astonishment, than a voyage of investigation in that hermit kingdom — one's own mind.

If you protest further that you prefer

## HOW TO READ

Romance, that you like to have your villains come up with and all the nice people married off in the last chapter, I can only assure you that in *every* chapter of this book one of the most tricky and treacherous villains — a false Notion — will be pursued and cornered and run through the vitals; that two Ideas of romantic proclivities (and of thoroughly eugenic antecedents), which have been kept from mating by this villain aforesaid, will be led to the altar; and that the happiness-ever-after of these successive couples will be proved by the fact that the next chapter will deal with their children.

If you still shrug your shoulders and say that this would appear to be a scenario for high-brows, I can only assure you that — quite on the contrary — it is a scenario for human beings; that it is for — because it is about — you and me and the man next door.

Moreover, the plan of this scenario is very simple. First, it proposes to induce you (not through my eyes, but through your own) to see just *how*, whether we ever analyze the process or not, we all must and all do read. Next, it proposes to induce you, in similar

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

manner, to see just *why*, whether we are conscious of the reasons or not, we any of us ever read at all. And finally, having led you to recognize for yourself the inherent limitations of this universal *method of reading*, and the latent possibilities that hide for each of us behind this universal *desire to read*, it proposes to induce you (out of your understanding, not out of mine) to formulate for yourself that attitude toward reading that alone will enable you intelligently and consciously to adapt the means at hand to the development and furthering of your personal purposes.

### II

We have already, in the preceding chapters, seen something of the unsuspected processes by which we actually do read. We have located and identified the sources we draw upon for the scenery, the animals, the human characters, and the intellectual conceptions, in terms of which we "produce" an author's scenario for ourselves. And we have located and identified the sources we draw upon for the meanings of the words in which these scenarios are written.

## HOW TO READ

But as yet, in spite of our assumptions to the contrary, we would appear to be mere creatures of chance, helplessly dependent (for material to read with) upon the first memory-picture, or the first word-meaning that our minds get hold of when they reach into the grab-bag of our past experience.

And to a certain extent we are.

If I suddenly present for your interpretation the words

A green tree

not only do I not know what picture your mind will present you with, but you are as ignorant, before the event, as I am, and as powerless to control the choice. Your mind simply reaches down into the "green tree" compartment of your stored experience and fetches up whatever comes handy: — a "generalized notion," or the elm tree in front of your childhood home, or a banyan monster in Madras, or what-not.

And yet, in the last chapter, we summed up our inquiry, as far as prosecuted, in the conclusion (and I assume that you acquiesced in it at the time) that learning to read did not

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

merely mean learning to draw "more and more skillfully" on our stored experience for scenario producing purposes, but also involved enlarging our "personal contexts," developing our responsiveness to verbal contexts, and "*learning to draw more and more discriminately on these two sources* for the word-meanings in which we interpret the directions that our successive partners, the authors, issue to us."

It is now necessary for us to discover how — by what actually employed process or procedure — we achieve and exercise this critical selection.

I assume that, in reading the last chapter, you personally acquiesced in its conclusions. Yet I can imagine you, after a little reflection, addressing me somewhat as follows: "That first chapter on 'Learning to Read' was *fine*. All it said about our minds being moving-picture concerns; about printed stories being nothing but scenarios; about our only material for their 'producing' being our own experience; — all this is not only astonishingly plain, once it has been pointed out, but it instantly gives to the whole idea of reading a

## HOW TO READ

port of *exciting interest*. And the second chapter, too, taken by itself, is convincing. Indeed, I've tried the thing out on myself and it *works*. The 'dictionary meanings' of words *are* only definitions of generalized notions. I *do* get the meanings of used words from the contexts, verbal and 'personal.' And yet I can't, for the life of me, make these two chapters hitch up. I don't see how I can be expected to make 'nicely discriminated' word-meanings for myself unless I *superintend the process* as I go along. But if I *stop to examine the meanings I am giving to words as I read them*, then I find that I can't 'read.' Instead of a 'mental movie,' or anything resembling one, I get nothing but a jumble of unrelated meanings, memories, associations, and ideas. Are you sure you are right? Or have I somehow gotten off the track?"

### III

Suppose we examine the mental mechanics of reading a little more closely — watch the wheels go round a bit — and see if we cannot clear these matters up. It is n't a difficult job if we go about it right. And these questions —

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

- (1) Why is it impracticable to "examine the meanings we are giving to words as we read them?"
- (2) Why is it impossible to "read" if we do stop to examine the meanings we are giving to individual words?
- (3) What is the actual way in which we do control our word interpretations?

—are of greater importance than appears on the surface. They strike, as it happens, to the very root of our inquiry. Indeed, the answer to the third of them is the root of our inquiry; and is going, therefore, to acquire far-reaching significance for us.

### IV

Let us glance back for a moment at the cinematograph.

You know, of course, that a motion-picture film is made up of a great number of individual photographs. That these were originally taken separately, but in rapid succession. That they are thrown on the screen, also separately, and in the original order, and at the original rapid rate — as a matter of fact, at the rate of about twenty per second. And you quite understand (although you cannot

## HOW TO READ

detect the fact for yourselves by observation) that it is precisely because each of these separate pictures is actually there, stationary, on the screen, long enough for us to perceive it, yet is always succeeded by another picture (ever so slightly different) too quickly for us to differentiate the impressions we receive from them, that the series merges, to our minds, into a "moving picture."

Now the significant fact that I wish to point out to you — the fact that is going to enable us to "hitch up" our previous discoveries to the facts of actual reading practice — is this: that the separate words on a page of print correspond EXACTLY to the separate pictures of a movie film.

It is not merely true in a sort of metaphorical sense that "reading" results in "mental movies."

It is literally true that the mental mechanics of the two processes are identical.

Let us examine them.

The cinematograph is operated at the rate of about twenty pictures per second. In other words, in one minute of the movies something like twelve hundred pictures, one after the



## WATCHING THE WHEELS

other, twenty to the second, are thrown on the screen before our eyes.

On the other hand, an ordinary reader takes about a minute to read an average page of the usual novel. Such a page contains in the neighborhood of three hundred words. Which is to say that in one minute of "reading" something like three hundred words, one after the other, five to the second, are flashed onto the sensitized screen of the mind.

And, in this case as in the other, it is precisely because each of these words is there, stationary, before our moving eyes, just long enough for us to *feel the flavor of its significance*, but is always — before we have time to differentiate the impressions made on us — abandoned for another word, different, yet either qualifying or qualified by the first one, that the series merges in our minds into the living flux of "representation" or "understanding" that we call "reading," and that we have elected to describe as a "mental movie."

Here, then, are our first two points already clear to us: —

## HOW TO READ

- (1) At *five* words to the *second*, it is obviously impossible to "examine the meanings we are giving to the words as we read them."
- (2) Yet if, in order to make such an examination possible, we slow down to, say, ten words to the minute, we instantly destroy the cinematographic effect of the merged series. Instead of a "mental movie" we get a "jumble of unrelated meanings, memories, associations and ideas."

In exactly the same way, if we slow a movie film down until each picture remains on the screen for two whole seconds, and is then, after an interval of darkness, succeeded, for two whole seconds more, by the next picture, we instantly turn a "moving picture" into a procession of meaningless monotony.

In both cases we have a watched pot that never boils.

### V

Of course this seems to land us in a vicious circle—in a sort of mouse-trap cylinder in which we go round and round without ever getting any forwarder.

Fortunately, however, there is a way out. There is a door to the trap. There is a very

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

practical way in which we not only can, but in actual practice frequently do, examine and control the meanings we give to the words we read.

This method is so simple, so natural, so unnotedly habitual to us, that you will laugh when I point it out. You use it constantly. But you use it so instinctively, so thoughtlessly, and with so little realization of fundamental relationship, not only to what we are now discussing, but to all living, that I am sure you do not know what it is. Nor, for the moment, am I going to tell you. There is, as it happens, a small matter of detail that we must master first.

### VI

We now understand (although we cannot detect the matter for ourselves by observation) that we "read" by carrying a "flavor of significance" forward from each printed word and blending it with the "flavors of significance" we take from the words that follow.

The things that we are wanting a means of controlling, therefore, are really "flavors of significance."

## HOW TO READ

But what, in the name of all that is practical and thinkable, may such a thing as a "flavor of significance" look like?

What, as a matter of cold fact, is a "flavor of significance?"

Let us see if we can find out.

### VII

Suppose, in actual conversation, I were to ask you the meaning of the word "good."

You would instantly *feel* that you knew. But you would find considerable difficulty in framing a reply that either of us considered satisfactory. And this (although the inability would doubtless embarrass you) is really quite as it should be. You are a human being, not a dictionary. It is your regular business to *feel* the notions called up in your mind by code-signals like "good." It is *not* your regular business to frame adequate definitions of those notions in other code-signals.

But, even in the matter of *feeling* meanings to yourself, a time element enters. You do not, instantly, feel the full meaning, to you, of the word "good." To do this would take time. Not much time, but some. Time

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

enough, let us say, *to feel all the way round the word.*

It does n't take you long to feel round a concrete word like "hairbrush." It takes you some time to feel round an abstract word like "unrighteousness."

Try it and see.

Your mind goes round "hairbrush" like a squirrel round a tree. A frisk of its tail and — it's looking at you from the other side. But your mind feels its way round "unrighteousness" like a blindfolded man using his hands for eyes. It may be ten seconds before it comes out with a full report.

Let us say, then, that it takes us, on the average, two seconds to feel the *full meaning*, to us, of a word.

It follows, does it not, that in reading at the rate of five words to the second, we have, on the average, and as the equivalent of our "flavor of significance," about *one tenth of a fully realized meaning* to carry forward from each word we read.

Let us see, now, if we can find a magnifying glass that will enable us to see, not a tenth of a fully realized meaning, — that would require a

## HOW TO READ

microscope, — but, say, a quarter or a fifth of such a meaning.

### VIII

Suppose, instead of asking you the meaning of a word, I were to ask you to play a game with me.

Suppose I were to ask you to speak out to me, frankly, immediately, and automatically, — that is, without thinking the matter over at all, — the *very first thing that popped into your head* as each of a series of words was spoken to you, slowly, one after the other.

Thus, if I were to give you the word “cow,” you would answer “red,” or “calf,” or “Jersey,” or “milk,” or whatever notion came up automatically to your mind at the instant of hearing the word.

As a matter of actual fact, if you are of average quickness in your mental reactions, you could, for ordinary words, and after a little practice, give me my answers in from seven to nine tenths of a second. That is to say, you could, on the average, answer me in eight tenths of a second. And as at least half of this time would be taken up in *making your*

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

*reply*, each answer would, roughly speaking, represent two fifths of a second's realization of that word's full meaning to you, or (since it takes two seconds, on the average, to attain such a realization complete) *one fifth of a fully realized meaning*.

Now, suppose that I were to select six words at random. And suppose that I were to propound them, in this fashion, first to one, and then to another of you; and in each case were to write down the answers. The record of words and answers would read somewhat as follows:

<i>Word</i>	<i>First Player's Answer</i>	<i>Second Player's Answer</i>
Water	Wet	Wash
Knife	Sharp	Carve
Good	Mother	Pie
Pepper	Salt	Hot
Blond	Hair	Charlie
Bond	Coupon	Break

Here, then, — crudely exaggerated by the action of a rough magnifying medium, and thus rendered, as it were, visible to the actual eye, — are some fractions of realized meanings; some "flavors of significance," coarser than those we read with, but yet akin to them.

We have only to examine them, for in-

## HOW TO READ

stance, to see that player number one would, at the moment of the test, have been likely to carry forward from the word "good" a "mother-goodness" flavor of significance; and player number two a "pie-goodness" flavor of significance.

Perhaps, if we try, we can make this list give us an answer to our third question.

### IX

We see that to player number one, at the moment of the test, the word "bond" suggested investments; while to player number two it suggested a desire for freedom. We can, therefore, conceive that, had they been reading, player number one would have carried forward from the word "bond" a *money-satisfaction* flavor, and player number two a *dissatisfaction-with-slavery* flavor.

But these would scarcely prove suitable flavors of significance for the same word in the same sentence. One of them — possibly even both of them — would need to be criticized and "controlled."

How, in actual reading, would these two players accomplish the adjustment?



## WATCHING THE WHEELS

Let us suppose a case.

Let us suppose that the sentence they were reading began —

The bond that held them together —

By the time that they had read thus far, player number one would be carrying forward a sort of “comfortable-circumstances” attitude toward the union. And player number two would be carrying forward a sort of “readiness-for-divorce” attitude toward it.

And now suppose that the balance of the sentence ran —

was thus a spiritual tie.

Instantly, both readers would find themselves “in wrong.”

And instantly, by a mental gesture, — a mere motion of the mind, — so familiar and instinctive as to be all but unconscious, each would make his or her own personal correction.

### X

Here, then, we have our third question cleared up for us.

We control our “flavors of significance” by

## HOW TO READ

hindsight, not by foresight. *We do not cut them to measure. We get them ready-made, and refit them when necessary.*

And for the most part no readjustments are needed. For, after all, word-meanings are by no means haphazard hand-me-downs. Each of us has, as a matter of fact, and for every word really contained in his vocabulary, a more or less richly composite meaning-notion of his own, — a personal generalization, — built up by slow degrees and repeated usings. And it is into these composites, as into grab-bags, that we really reach — reach at the rate of five times per second — for personal “flavors of significance” that shall fit the verbal context.

It is n’t often, therefore, that our minds bring up for us such incongruous and unusable flavors of meaning as those just examined in the case of the word “bond.”

In an overwhelming majority of cases, the “meanings” we pull out are adequate. And even in the other cases, the needed readjustments are usually slight and are made instinctively, without conscious thought, and almost instantly forgotten.

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

But the more alert the reader is (and especially the more alert he is on this basis of right understanding of the nature of our reading processes), the more frequently will he detect these errors and inadequacies, and the more often will he make these mental gestures of correction. And each time that he does so he increases the suppleness of his mind, betters his technical skill of interpretation, adds permanently to the richness of that particular word-meaning composite, and, in all these ways, strengthens the foundations of efficiency for his future reading.

### XI

Alertness, then, is the first requisite for the reader. And by "alertness" I mean, here, expectant interest, focused attention, and a mental readiness to act.

### XII

But before I go on to point out the particular character and type of alertness demanded of the reader by the reading-facts we have established thus far in our inquiry, I want to clear your mind of a misconception that we

## HOW TO READ

are forever entertaining, like a bad angel, un-  
awares.

We are all of us given to thinking of "reading" as of a comparatively recent human attainment, based upon the invention of graphic signs.

In reality, however, reading is not an attainment, but a natural function and inborn aptitude of the mind.

A thousand centuries before alphabets were, reading was.

Semi-human hunters read the incised records of the game trails before they had even learned to cook the flesh of their quarry. Immemorially forgotten savages read the faces of their friends and the minds of their enemies before the stone age was dreamed of. Prehistoric precursors of the prophets read the signs of the weather in the skies, and their still prehistoric successors became priests and read the Will of God in their own hearts, untold ages before the first cuneiform inscription was impressed on the first brick in Babylonia.

Nor are these expressions mere figures of speech. It is a "simile" only by inversion to call "reading the signs of the times" a simile.

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

The real simile lies rather in speaking of "reading a book." For the word "read" (to go no further back than its immediate parent) is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning to "take counsel." And its linguistic first cousin is that other ancient expression, "to red up," — to "red" meaning to tidy, to put in order; and hence to clear up and explain. "Reading," then, is a form of "redding," — to take counsel by putting things in order. And you can no more (without smothering it to death) keep the human mind from "reading" than you can keep the human body from breathing. And you will note that for all forms of reading — for that of the semi-human hunter no less than for that to which this book is intended to guide you — alertness (meaning expectant interest, focused attention, and a mental readiness to act) is the first requisite.

### XIII

In this volume we are dealing with reading in its everyday sense of reading letters, newspapers, magazines, and books — written and printed language in general. And even in this sense it is practically permissible to-day to

## HOW TO READ

say that "everybody reads." It is also true that whatever actual reading any of us do is accomplished by *the exercise of some alertness*. For one no more reads a page of print by mechanically passing one's eyes across and across its lines, and perhaps silently forming the words with one's lips, while one's mind is playing hide and seek elsewhere, than one reads a game trail by following it, eyes on the ground ticking off deer tracks, but mind and imagination walking up Broadway.

Let us be clear about this.

It happens to all of us, at times, to discover that, while we've imagined we were reading, we really were n't; to find, on turning over a page, that we've no idea as to what was on it. Generally, in such cases, if we take the trouble to examine our own minds, we find that while we were automatically going through the mental and physical motions of reading, we were really being lazily and undirectedly alert about something else — going over the month's accounts, or wondering why some friend acted so offish when we last met.

Again, it sometimes happens to all of us to realize, on turning over a page, that a single

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

sentence on it, say three quarters of the way up from the bottom, is the only thing on it that we seem really to have taken in. If we turn back and read the sentence over again, we can generally discover exactly what it was that caused our minds to stop wool-gathering for an instant and roused us to a half-hearted and momentary alertness.

### XIV

For right reading, however, it is not enough to be alert.

The alertness must be both informed and disciplined. It must be based on understanding and trained to the point of unconscious performance.

Let me illustrate this last statement.

I said, a while back, that the mind "reads" as naturally as the body breathes. Yet the first thing that a would-be opera singer has to learn is *how to breathe*. It is n't enough that she breathe naturally. Her breathing must be both informed and disciplined. She must understand both the mechanism at her disposal and the purposes of its employment. And she must so train herself in the technique

## HOW TO READ

of performance that her lungs function without conscious thought for the adequate achievement of her changing personal aims.

### xv

Or, let us take a cruder analogy.

Alertness is a prerequisite in driving an automobile. But it is not enough to be alert. Here, too, the alertness must be both informed and disciplined: based on understanding and trained to the point of unconscious performance.

The kind of alertness that grasps the steering wheel so tightly as to breed cramps in the wrists is more of a handicap than a help. Yet this stage — the stage of exaggeratedly conscious alertness — has to be passed through.

The kind of alertness that is so preoccupied with technique that it keeps telling itself which pedal to push in an emergency is also more of a handicap than a help. But this stage — the stage of reducing conscious performance to a subconscious habit — must also be passed through.

The driver who is ignorant of the mechanism of his engine keeps going by the grace of



## WATCHING THE WHEELS

God — or of some man in Detroit, Michigan. But the driver whose mind is busy with his engine when he is threading the intricacies of traffic is likely to get into trouble with the police.

No one is master of the automobile — no one is capable of driving one entirely “on his own,” anywhere that it will go for the accomplishment of his own ends, to the full of its inherent possibilities and to the limit of his own capacity — until he has gradually built up, on a constantly broadening basis of understanding, — understanding of the working of internal-combustion engines in general, of the idiosyncracies of his own machine in particular, of the rules of the road, of the psychology of other drivers and of himself, and of the character of his own pursuit, — an alertness that is seldom conscious of itself, yet always many-sidedly operative, and that is usually able, by *becoming conscious of itself*, to detect the causes of its own shortcomings, and by correcting these to add to its own efficiency.

## HOW TO READ

### XVI

And it is no otherwise with reading.

It is only by thus building up, on a constantly broadening basis of understanding, an informed and disciplined alertness, that we learn to drive that other internal-combustion engine, our own mind, along the roads of print toward our chosen objective—be this an afternoon's enjoyment or an intellectual goal.

### XVII

Do not, however, mistake me. The most ordinary reader exercises alertness. He has to in order to read. Some measure of expectant interest, no matter how slight; some degree of focused attention, no matter how vague; some mental readiness to act, no matter how sluggish, he must bring to the task. Else the very act of reading ceases to take place.

But the ordinary reader, because he misunderstands the nature of reading, misdirects these elements of alertness; if, indeed, he directs them at all.

The ordinary reader thinks of a story as a

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

concrete thing contained in a book, just as he thinks of a lemonade as a concrete thing contained in a glass. And he assumes that, just as he sucks the one in, ready-mixed, through a straw, so he drinks the other in, ready-made, through his eyes.

Naturally, his expectant interest is centered on "what the author has to say." His attention is focused outside himself. His mental readiness to act is largely reduced to a readiness to suck faster if he likes it and to suck slower if he does n't.

And — I want to underscore this fact — *the thing works*. It does n't work the way he supposes, but it arrives — after a fashion. He *reads*, not because he understands what he is doing, but because he is built that way. He keeps going, as we said of the auto-driver, by the grace of God. If it were really true, as the proverb seems to imply, that God helps only those who help themselves, we should most of us be stalled motors by the wayside.

### XVIII

But really "learning to read" is another matter.

## HOW TO READ

And the reader who has once grasped in outline the true nature of reading, and who wishes to build up for himself on that foundation a better and more personally remunerative technique, should begin by *altering the character of his alertness.*

He knows that the words the author prints are but signals to his mind — but push-buttons that his eyes press as they pass over them. He knows that the flux of “notions” they call up, the associative memories, and mental pictures, and character conceptions, and idea complexes, that these form themselves into, are *his* word-notions, *his* memories, *his* mind pictures, *his* character conceptions, *his* idea constructions. And he will, therefore, practice centering his expectant interest, not on “what the author is saying,” but on “what the author is saying to *him.*”

He knows, moreover, that *whatever happens when we read happens inside ourselves.* And he will, therefore, practice keeping his real attention turned inward.

And he knows that he, and he alone, is the one who can, when occasion arises, stage-

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

manage and control this internal upwelling of notions and memories, pictures and ideas. And he will, therefore, practice the development of a mental readiness to act that consists in readiness to *act as stage manager on his own initiative*; adjusting himself as well as he may to the author's mood, and producing to the best of his equipment the author's scenario.

### XIX

This, then, is the root of our inquiry: — this fact that, in reading, we deliberately and of our own choice *expose ourselves to suggestion*; respond *automatically and personally* to the successive stimuli of words and word-groups; and then consciously or unconsciously *criticize and control our automatic responses*.

This (although he does n't know it) is what the tramp on a park bench, scanning the draggled pages of last week's paper, is doing.

And this is all that the keenest mind in Christendom does when it reads.

The road between the two, as far as mere technique goes, lies along the line of teaching

## HOW TO READ

one's self little by little to do this common act of reading with an informed and disciplined alertness; an alertness based on a constantly broadening understanding of one's own mind-workings and of one's own aims, and trained to a greater and greater suppleness of unconscious performance.

### XX

Before closing this chapter, however, I want to point out the importance, in connection with all that follows in this volume, that this discovered method of our "control" of word-meanings is going to assume for us.

It looks an insignificant little discovery — this fact that *we first react automatically to words and then criticize the reaction*, and that this is absolutely the only method we have, either of getting at our word-meanings (which are, so to say, the molecules of our thought) or of controlling them. And yet, in reality, it is the root of self-knowledge and the key to all that has any right to be called culture.

Talkers of cant tell us, in effect if not in words, that culture is something that we can

## WATCHING THE WHEELS

receive from without; something that exists, independently of its possessors; something that can be imparted, and accepted, and built into our consciousness and our personalities like bricks into a wall. They would have us believe that culture is a sort of censored and sublimated sophistication — a knowing (through an eager submission of ourselves to the best authorities) of what to feel and what not to; what to like and what not to; what to admire and what not to; what to think and what not to.

Do not believe them. Culture is always unique, for it is an individual achievement — a by-product of personal living.

Its essential entity is an "attitude toward the cosmos." Its component elements — the things from which it is built up — are *recognized relationships* between the life inside us and the world without. And the ultimate atoms out of which these component elements are constructed are neither more nor less than "controlled meanings" — spontaneous personal feelings, subsequently criticized.

Culture is a gradually coördinated accumulation of criticized reactions — of the "con-

## HOW TO READ

trolled meanings" that we ourselves have given to hunger and thirst and satiety; to love and friendship and hate; to hope and fear and indifference; to words and sentences and books; to art and philosophy and religion; — in a word, to life.

Much fun has been made of those who say, "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like." The fun-makers are intellectual snobs, if, indeed, they are not shallow-pated fools. For, granted that they themselves know anything about art (and not merely about what they think they ought to think about it), they started from that identical beginning — the beginning of "knowing what they liked" and nothing more.

To "know what we like" is nearer to culture than to know what we ought to like. For to know the latter, beforehand, is often to be prevented from ever knowing whether we really like it or not. But to like a thing, or to dislike it, is to have reacted to it; to have lived with regard to it; to have given it a meaning. When we have criticized this meaning, — when we have learned how and why we like it or dislike it, and have approved or



## WATCHING THE WHEELS

disapproved of our spontaneous feeling, —  
we have taken a step toward culture.

And the only reason that culture is in any  
way derivable from books is that reading is a  
form of living.

## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT'S THE USE?

#### I

WE have now completed the first portion of our inquiry. We have found out what reading really is. We have found out how we do it. And from this knowledge we have drawn our preliminary conclusions as to the true nature of "learning to read" and as to the first steps necessary for setting about this endlessly interesting self-enhancement.

We have satisfied ourselves that this learning is not a dull, two-year task in a primary school, as usually assumed. We know, indeed, that it is no once-for-all acquirement (like learning the Greek alphabet or learning to extract cube roots) in any educational curriculum. We see, on the contrary, that it is a till-death-us-do-part sort of learning. For we see that it consists in a lifelong, year-by-year, progressive learning to put the constantly accumulating store of our own personal experience into fuller and fuller order, by using it for the "producing," on the stage of our own

## WHAT'S THE USE?

consciousness, of the reported actions, the suggested emotions, and the outlined thoughts of others.

And from the vantage-point of this knowledge we begin to see, opening out at the feet of our clarified understanding, a deepening perspective of possibilities. We begin, in fact, to realize that learning to read is *an adventure*.

### II

And of course the first result of this realization is a thrill.

We feel the romance, the allure, of the undertaking. The vitally personal nature of it appeals to us. The very fact that we must set out upon it, like pioneers, dependent upon our own original equipment and upon the subsequent, day-by-day results of our own resourcefulness, stimulates us. The realization that we shall be setting out for an individual exploring of two mysterious, little-known, and infinitely exciting worlds — the world outside us and the world within — fires our imagination.

At first blush we are all enthusiasm for the start.

## HOW TO READ

### III

But, on further thought, there is sure to come a reaction.

We are going, in this very chapter, to see that two alternating impulses — the impulse to do, and the impulse to shrink from doing — lie at the very heart of all our living; are, as it were, the beating of that heart. And the strong impulse-to-action that is born of our realization of the fine, adventurous possibilities of thus learning to read is sure to be succeeded by a counter-impulse — an impulse-to-inaction.

We see that this adventure will be very long, and very slow, and very likely arduous; and so we ask ourselves why we should bother.

We see that, properly prosecuted, it would inevitably call for other, less easy, things than mere enthusiasm: for patience and pertinacity; for the honesty of humbleness; for the courage of self-reliance; for grace as well as grit; and we pause and ask ourselves if the game is worth the candle.

"This world," we say to ourselves, "is a busy place.. We are not specialists, we are

## WHAT'S THE USE?

'general practitioners' in life. Is not the pursuit of special knowledge, the attainment of special skill, even in so useful and universal a thing as reading, the concern of the specialist?"

And so we shrug our shoulders and ask ourselves, "What's the use?"

### IV

Very good. This is a legitimate question, although, as we shall see in a moment, it probes very deep. For, since reading is a form of living, this question, applied to it, is but a form of saying, "What's the use — ever?" Perhaps, however, in answering the reading form of this question we shall find that we have answered the general form also.

This much at least is evident to start with: we cannot hope to answer this reading-question reasonably until we have uncovered for ourselves our real reasons for reading. And thus we are led directly to the second item of our projected investigation — the inquiry into *why* we read.

Suppose, like good gardeners, we now dig straight down to the real root of this matter.

## HOW TO READ

### V

There are, at bottom, two reasons, and only two reasons in the world, why any of us ever read anything.

We are seldom conscious of these reasons, yet we are always, when we read, actuated by one or other of them. It makes no difference who we are or what we are; these reasons and no others hold good for us. They hold good for Hapsburgs and for hoboes. They are all the philosopher has, and Fluffy Ruffles has them.

Nor does the nature of the thing read make any difference.

This may be a sky-sign on Broadway, or a signpost at a country crossroads. It may be the account of a murder trial in the morning paper, or a bargain-sale notice delivered in the afternoon mail. It may be a love scene in "Hearts Aflutter" (sixty thousand sold before publication), or the chapter on the Categorical Imperative in Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" (copyright expired). It makes no difference.

Consciously or unconsciously, wittingly or

## WHAT'S THE USE?

unwittingly, we all read everything that we do read (not according to its nature, but according to our need) either

(1) To get away from ourselves;

or,

(2) To find ourselves.

### VI

Yes, I know. You are nodding your head (meaning "aye, aye, sir") over the first of these statements. And, deep down inside, you are thinking that I am talking highbrow in making the second.

But you are wrong.

The significance of these expressions is equally simple, and the experiences to which they relate are equally common to us all.

Wanting to "get away from one's self" merely expresses the recurrent need, experienced by each one of us, of forgetting for a while the tangle of contradictory impulses, mixed motives, cross-purposes, and conflicting emotions that is one's self; and which, when too intimately realized, or too continuously envisaged, becomes unbearable.

Wanting to "find one's self" merely ex-

## HOW TO READ

presses the equally recurrent craving, equally experienced by us all, actively to achieve some measure of order, no matter how fleeting or how restricted, in the ever-flexing meshes of this same internal tangle.

However, this is a stuffy subject. Let us get out into the open air.

### VII

Just below my window as I write there is a strip of park that runs — like the Gadarene swine — down a steep hill to the Hudson. It is some miles in length, this strip. But in width it only varies between a perpendicular hundred yards and a shelving quarter-mile. Yet big shade trees beautify it. And long paths parallel the river through it, rising and sinking, on the swells of its slopes like the wakes of little boats. And there are benches in it — benches that face the water across squirrel-dotted sweeps of grass. And there are people on the benches. People with babies. People with books. People with spent hands folded in dejected laps. People with high hopes new-kindling in far-focused eyes.

Let us suppose a desperate morning: a



## WHAT'S THE USE?

morning when the milkman has n't come (or the blue-ribbon chef has given notice); when the baby cannot somehow seem to cut its tooth (or the limousine to use its carburettor); when Himself has gotten out of bed on the wrong side; when the people next door keep playing the victrola; when, in short, the cosmic Doll is just generally leaking sawdust at every joint.

Let us suppose that on such a morning a woman — yourself or another — flees to this strip of park and sits down on one of its green benches: on a bench that looks across a stretch of level lawn; past a rosily budding oak; past a white signboard nailed to a driven stake; out to the restful river, where the big ships lie at anchor and the little shallops come and go.

For a time, her need — the need of escaping from herself — is ministered to by the sheer sensed beauty of the scene. She lies back on its loveliness. She loses herself in it. She floats on it like a grateful swimmer in a summer sea.

But not, alas, for long.

Little meddlesome messages from home —

## HOW TO READ

like Marconigrams in mid-Atlantic — begin to reach her.

The river view blurs.

The butcher's bill reasserts itself.

With a little shudder of impatience she turns away and looks for a new, a nearer, a more insistent interest.

She watches the nursemaid on the next bench who is industriously upturning a baby in the vain hope of emptying it of yells.

She follows with a speculative eye a wistful couple that come strolling past with finger tips surreptitiously touching.

She notes the growing glory of the budding oak and for a moment fills her mind with that.

And each of these things in turn serves her need for a time, and then loses its efficacy.

Finally, her glance lights on the white sign-board; but at first she only takes it in as a noticeable spot — a white rectangle against a green background. As that she toys with it. She moves it (in her mind) to the right and left; fits it in, picture-puzzle fashion, at the foot of the oak — plays an idle, esthetic game with it.

At last, she tires of this in its turn. She

## WHAT'S THE USE?

sees that it is a notice board. She realizes that there is printing on it. She gets desperately up. She walks slowly over to it. She reads it.

### VIII

And what, you ask, does it say?

What, I answer, does it matter?

Perhaps it says, "KEEP OFF THE GRASS."

Perhaps it says, "TO 96TH STREET AND THE GATE."

What does matter, here, is *her reason for reading it*. For here, in its simplest form, absolutely unadulterated, "chemically pure," we have the first of our two impulses toward reading. This woman read the signboard to get away from herself.

### IX

But she need not have.

Suppose that by ever so little we change our supposition.

Suppose that the sudden peace, the far view, the spring air, the muted sounds of busy life rising from the river, prove healing to this woman's hurt.

## HOW TO READ

Suppose that in consequence, and without her conscious knowledge, the tide of her courage and energy that had, like the tide in the river, been running out, turns and begins to "make."

Suppose, in further consequence, that the victrola and the milkman, the baby's tooth and the family grouches, the little puzzles and big problems in the stream of her life, begin, like the anchored barges and battleships on the river, to swing at their moorings and to face the other way. So that when, at last, the Marconigrams begin to come through, they are no longer S.O.S's of desperation, but urgings to action.

"Good Heavens!" she says, suddenly, "I never dreamed that it was that late!"

She draws a long, invigorated breath. She straightens her shoulders and looks about her. She wonders which is her nearest way out of the park; sees the signboard; gets alertly up; goes over to it; reads it.

### x

And what, you ask, *does* it say?  
What, I repeat, *does* it matter?

## WHAT'S THE USE?

Perhaps it says, "TO 96TH STREET AND THE GATE."

Perhaps it says, "NO DOGS ALLOWED AT LARGE."

What matters, here, is again her reason for reading it. For here, in its simplest form, isolated, unadulterated, "chemically pure," we have the second of our impulses toward reading. This time the woman read the sign to find herself.

### XI

And this woman in the park is typical of us all. Just so — not according to its nature, but according to our need; impelled, first by one and then by the other of these two promptings — it is possible for us to read anything; from the "HELP WANTED, FEMALE" column — which we may read (1) because we have read everything else in the paper and still wish to "keep from thinking," or (2) because we want a job — to Fox's "Book of Martyrs," which we may read (1) to kill time or (2) to prepare for eternity.

Nor does it cover the ground to say that in either one of these two modes we may read

## HOW TO READ

anything. It is necessary to add that in alternation between these two moods we *must* read *everything*.

Are you inclined to doubt this last?

Let us glance, for a moment, beyond the scope of our immediate inquiry.

Not alone our reading, but our lives, alternate between these two moods; are conducted in these two modes; are governed by these two appetites, urges, — call them what you will, — this desire to do, and this desire to shrink from doing; this *recurrent keenness personally to master reality*, and this *recurrent craving personally to escape from the consciousness of its tyranny*; this longing to “find ourselves,” and this longing to “get away from ourselves.”

If you doubt this, look into your own heart. You will see (as your eyes get used to the dusk) that it is multiformly true. These two urges are, so to say, the legs of our inner being. We move, from day to day, from hour to hour, sometimes from moment to moment, *by advancing first one and then the other of them*.

For we are built that way. We are spiritual bipeds.

## WHAT'S THE USE?

### XII

But, as I have already said, we are seldom conscious of these reasons.

No one, unless he be an unconscionable prig, thinks, say, of the looking-up of a subject in an encyclopedia, as an effort to "find himself"; nor, unless he is very low in his mind, of the reading, say, of a detective story on a journey as an effort to "get away from himself."

Let us therefore briefly bridge the gap between what analysis has shown us to be the fundamental character of our reading impulses and the more familiar forms in which these impulses habitually manifest themselves to us in daily life.

What are the simplest terms of everyday speech in which we can adequately summarize our conscious impulses toward reading?

Let us put it that all these conscious impulses fall under one or other of the following heads: —

Some form of wanting to know.  
Some form of wanting to play.  
Some form of wanting to forget.

## HOW TO READ

Here, however, instead of two divisions, we have three. And while the first and last of these are obvious translations of the two expressions we have been using, the relation that the second bears to these expressions is not so clear. "Some form of wanting to play" describes a class of reading-impulses familiar to us all. But how does it fit into our recent analysis, if, indeed, it does fit into it?

Let us examine the play-impulse a bit more closely.

### XIII

Our old friend the New Standard Dictionary defines "play" as "action without special aim, or for amusement; opposed to *work* or *earnest*." And from time immemorial poets, puritans, and push-aheads — looking on, from their respective temperamental angles, at the apparent frivolities of kids, kittens, cubs, and young children — have been at one in accepting this definition at its surface value.

But a new spirit of wanting to know — the spirit of redding things up by a more intelligent reading of the book of Nature, the scientific spirit — has recently come into the world.



## WHAT'S THE USE?

And all kinds of men, singly and in groups, have been looking with freshly focused minds at all sorts of supposedly unimportant happenings; even at the gambols of kittens and at the games of children. And (since science, like charity, begins at home) one of the first things that these latter observers discovered was the fact that no kitten ever plays at anything except at being a cat, and that no puppy ever plays at anything except at being a dog.

At first this seemed interesting, but not especially important. But, as the observations were extended, it developed that the lower one goes in the scale of life, the more meager and short-lived become the play-impulses of the young; while the higher one goes in the scale, the more complex and long-continued they are. And when the facts had been sufficiently studied and compared, it became clear that the play of young animals, far from being a mere meaningless spending of surplus energy, is really in the nature of a preparation — *a dramatization of their developing instincts*. And when, gradually, a great many men and groups of men, working along separate lines and ultimately comparing notes

## HOW TO READ

and sharing discoveries, had built up the sciences of biology and comparative psychology, it became evident at last that the same is true of children.

Of course, at first, it did n't look (to take a crude example) as though the small son of highly civilized parents was "playing at being a man" when he used the first stick he got hold of to beat the cat with. But no sooner had biology discovered that the life of every creature, from conception to maturity, is a condensed recapitulation of the evolution of its race, than the matter became clear. The three-year-old club-wielder is *not yet playing at being a civilized man like his father*, but is *still playing at being a club-wielding wild man like his prehistoric forbears*. He is, in fact, *dramatizing the instincts of that phase of development through which he is then passing*.

Later on he and his fellows will dramatize the instincts of savage tribesmen by forming "gangs" and by the building (quite without "special aim," as the dictionary would say) of bonfires — at the same period developing the savage's thoughtless cruelty and the fire-defended nomad's fear of the dark.

## WHAT'S THE USE?

Nor, while all this is going on, is the child neglecting to dramatize that other instinct—the instinct of imitativeness. He does this by playing at driving tandem, playing at keeping store, playing at keeping house. And he constantly mixes the two. As when he dramatizes the ancestral instinct of pugnacity in elaborate snowball fights, and organizes the defenses and the attacks on the supposed ground-plan of Verdun.

### XIV

In short, play, in the young, is a form of practice; an embodying in action of developing instincts.

And the same thing, with a slight difference, is true of grown-ups.

Even grown-up animals play.

The wise old dog, chasing the chicken that he takes very good care not to catch, is playing; and is dramatizing an instinct that life, as he is living it, forbids him to indulge in earnest.

And the grown-up man, with a thousand instincts suppressed by life as he is living it, and by the need of concentration on the indi-

## HOW TO READ

vidual tasks that this life imposes, takes his recreation by playing; and plays by dramatizing one or more of these otherwise inoperative urges.

He may do this quite simply and directly — dramatize his instinct for the chase by going after big game, or by shooting squirrels, or by firing at clay pipes at the county fair. Or he may do it vicariously — dramatize his fighting instinct by watching a boxing-match. Or he may do it obliquely — dramatize his acquisitive instinct by collecting postage stamps. Or he may do it symbolically — dramatize his your-money-or-your-life instinct by pointing four aces at an opponent's head and relieving him of his "pile" at penny-ante.

### XV

But there is another form of play; another method of dramatizing suppressed instincts — the most universally applicable, indeed, and most minutely adjustable of all methods to all needs.

A man may dramatize any instinct that he has by taking the right book down from

## WHAT'S THE USE?

the right shelf and by then *identifying himself in imagination with the instinct's pictured fulfillment.*

And this is precisely what we are seeking to do when we read from any impulse recognizable as "some form of wanting to play."

We are seeking relaxation by dramatizing some side of ourselves that is not usually free to function. We are, indeed, trying for refreshment by "finding ourselves" afresh.

### XVI

Let us get back to our muttons.

These being our reasons for reading, what is the use of taking more than ordinary trouble in learning to read?

The answer goes into a nutshell.

We live, as it happens, in a world where all mental highways are partly paved with ink. We live in a world where the avenues of approach to "ourselves" and many of the most direct avenues of escape from "ourselves" — the alternating roads of our constant needs — are, at least in part and by inescapable necessity, roads of reading.

How effectively — and how far — we are

## HOW TO READ

able to go along these roads depends upon our means of locomotion.

"Learning to read," in the common-school fashion, is but "learning to walk" in the nursery sense. The rest is up to us.

We live, as it were, alone, in the country.

We can, if we choose, keep no horse in the stable except "shank's mare." We can confine ourselves to the meager utilitarianism of "hoofing it," and to the modest relaxation of "walks."

Or we can ride a bike.

Or own a Ford.

Or drive an eight-cylinder car.

### XVII

This is the answer.

Of course, as you may perhaps be moved to point out to me, it is not an ultimate answer.

But there are no ultimate answers.

And for this particular answer this much at least may be said: The question — "What's the use?" — is a query that, like a recurrent decimal, may go on repeating itself forever. And this answer is a recurrent answer.

Pose this question from any angle you

## WHAT'S THE USE?

choose, couch your reply in any terms you elect, — theological or biological, metaphysical or physical, mystical or plain practical, — and this answer can be shown to be the gist of your reply.

It is, indeed, the ultimate essence of the only answer there is.

### XVIII

And now, in closing this chapter, and while we have our reasons for reading thus recognizably before us, I want to say a further word about them in connection with the special purposes of our inquiry — the acquirement, namely, of a more intelligent use of reading for our own ends.

We have seen that our reasons for reading may be summed up as follows:—

Some urge toward wanting to know, and some urge toward wanting to play; both being forms of the desire to “find ourselves”; and some urge toward wanting to forget, the same being an impulse to escape from the consciousness of a side of ourselves that is weary, or baffled, or discouraged.

Please note, then, that the last of these reasons can justify itself by fulfillment only

## HOW TO READ

through the development, in us, of one or other of the other two urges.

We cannot forget, through reading, except by becoming interested in what we read. And we cannot become interested in what we read except by beginning to "want to know" or by beginning to "play."

We cannot, in short, escape from one side of ourselves except by beginning to formulate another.

We are like a man, standing. If he wearies of standing on one foot, he can stand on the other. And if he wearies of standing on that, he can shift back. Only, mentally, we are centipedes. We have a hundred shifts.

We are many-sided. And there are three ways of ministering to, and of being served by, — each of them through reading. "Wanting to know" is an active side of us, reaching out for its own. "Wanting to play" is a smothered side of us, asking to be allowed to breathe. "Wanting to forget" is a wearied side of us, asking to be relieved from duty. An intelligent use of reading for our own ends, therefore, involves an intelligent selection of what we will elect to know, of how we will elect to



## WHAT'S THE USE?

play, and of what forms of these activities we will elect to employ for purposes of relief and relaxation.

Later on, in the chapter on "A Sense of Direction," we shall return to this matter of intelligent choice. But before doing this it is necessary for us to gain, at first-hand, a more vivid realization and a more intimate understanding of the many-sidedness that we have above referred to. We must find out exactly what we mean by calling reading an exploration of two worlds — the world outside us and the world within.

## CHAPTER V

### A SENSE OF DIRECTION

#### I

WE have all heard of the Frenchman who, at about forty, discovered, quite by accident and to his great surprise, that in keeping his diary and answering his correspondence and making his business reports and other taken-for-granted uses of pen and paper, he had all his life been writing prose without knowing it.

We have now reached a point in our inquiry where a somewhat similar realization should be ours. All our lives we have been doing the intricate things set forth in the preceding chapters, and have been doing them for the specific reasons therein explained, and yet have never suspected either fact.

It is not true, therefore, as it may possibly appear to some of you, that I am recommending you to learn an unfamiliar game, or to acquire a new and heretofore unpracticed technique. Far from it. The game that I am recommending to you we all began to play,

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

untaught, in the nursery. And the technique that I am urging you to perfect is the same technique that, from inborn necessity, we have all developed and which, in a catch-as-catch-can way, we all employ in our most casual scanning of the most ephemeral print.

All that I am suggesting that you should do is to play this game with a more conscious knowledge of its nature and possibilities; and develop this technique with a more purposeful and personal realization of its requirements.

### II

Nor does this mean that I am urging you to become self-conscious in your reading.

I happened, just now, to speak of reading as a game. Let us consider for a moment the relationship that self-consciousness bears to our performance in those more outward and objective games — games where physical skill as well as mental supervision is involved — such as tennis, golf, billiards.

Many people play tennis, or billiards, or golf, very much as most of us read — by the

## HOW TO READ

spontaneous, unanalyzed, and all but undirected exercise of their natural aptitudes. They learn the rules. They flounder round for a time while their hands and eyes are getting the hang of the tools and their tricks. And then they go ahead, hit-or-missedly increasing their speed and accuracy and generalship by the catch-as-catch-can, experimental route of personal practice. And in this sort of play, once the initial awkwardnesses are overcome and so long as one is pitted against players of one's own caliber, self-consciousness seldom figures. But once let such a player determine to "learn the game"; once let him place himself under the guidance of a teacher; and instantly self-consciousness becomes a prime factor to be taken into account — at once the subtlest means, and the deadliest foe, to progress.

At first it is crassly and exaggeratedly present in all the student's efforts. There are so many things that he has to do (things that he has been doing pretty well without knowing it, but now has to do better; things that he has been doing wrong, and now has to make himself do properly; things that he has not

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

been doing at all, and now has to take into account) that for a time he feels as though he were driving sixteen horses abreast, while balancing himself on the bare back of one of them.

But let us skip this phase of his training. It is to a later adjustment that I wish to call your attention. And, moreover, we have already dealt with these initial problems of coördination in comparing the developing of an auto-driver's "unconscious alertness" to that required of the skillful reader.

There comes a time, then, when this learner of a game of skill is dealing with such delicately mixed matters of muscular training and mental control as those involved in a billiard-player's "stroke," or a tennis-player's "delivery" of a fast serve, or a golfer's "follow-through." He now understands the laws that govern the material objects he is manipulating. He knows definitely what it is that he is striving to accomplish. And he has acquired at least an occasional semi-perfection of unconscious performance. But he wants to correct a fault, or to add a cubit to his efficiency, or to turn "occasional semi-

## HOW TO READ

perfection" into a more constant and reliable asset of his technical equipment. And either under the direct guidance of a coach, or in self-supervised practice, he is endeavoring to attain this improved status.

Almost every one of us has struggled, in some form of psycho-physical self-training, with this curiously baffling problem. And almost every one of us has discovered in consequence that a deliberate, self-conscious determining of what it is that we wish to do, and of how it is that we propose to do it, is necessary *before the undertaking of the act*; but that the act itself must, if it is going to "get over" in any way worth mentioning, be performed with the free, untrammelled, unlooked-at play of physical spontaneity.

Let us put it that the only way in which these niceties of skill can possibly be attained is by Self-Consciousness playing teacher to our muscles; by its going over and over for them the things they are to do and to leave undone; and by its then, at the crucial instant of execution, turning its back on them with a nice and considerate delicacy and saying, "Go ahead now, I'm not looking."

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

### III

And the same thing, precisely, is true of the subtler mind-training involved in improving one's reading skill. I am therefore so far from wishing to urge you to self-consciousness in reading that, on the contrary, I would urge you to a more and ever more zestful and complete yielding of yourself, in the actual act of reading, to the full, free, untrammelled play of your natural faculties. But I would have you train these faculties to a suppler and more efficient performance of their unconscious tasks, through a knowledge of the real nature of reading, and through an alert readiness personally to supervise the process on occasion. I would have you gradually develop a growingly intelligent system of *individual experimentation in the choice of what you read*, based upon your growing understanding of our common and self-serving reasons for reading. And I would have you gradually learn to serve your personal ends more and more fully by concentrating your attention and your interest and your subsequent criticism on *what actually happens inside*

## HOW TO READ

*of you* when you read the things you have chosen.

### IV

We have already considered in some detail the question of personally supervising our reading processes as occasion demands and shall deal with other aspects of the matter later.

In the present chapter we are going to seek out, from our actual experience in reading, a sound basis for a system of individual experiment in the choice of what we read.

And afterward we shall examine more carefully the true character and real importance of what actually happens in us in reading.

But even for our present purpose it is important that we have at least a general idea of the fact that "the things that actually happen in us when we read" form the sole value-basis that reading has for us, as well as the one basic test of all our judgments of its worth for us.

And the proof of this is simple.

Nothing whatever does happen when we read except what happens inside ourselves.



## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

And since we read wholly in terms of our past experience, these *happenings* all consist either of revivifyings of simple items of that experience (revisualized seeings, reawakened emotions, and the like), or of new, never-before-achieved combinings of old experience into new awarenesses, new understandings, new sympathies and prejudices, new thoughts — in fine, into *new experiences*.

But to know pleasure and pain, to feel delight and disgust, to be moved to sympathy, resentment, pity, and hate, to observe human conduct and approve or deplore it, to judge it by our own and to estimate our own by it, to be stirred to active, self-defining acquiescence in the views of our fellows, or to be roused to an active, self-revealing formulation of our disagreement with them, — are not such things as these of the very essence of being alive? Are they not, indeed, the coefficients of living? And are not such things as these the precise sort of things, and the sole sort of things that happen in us when we read?

But suppose none of them happen?

Our proposition is proved by the absurdity of its converse. What possible value can any

## HOW TO READ

reading matter have for us, or what handhold for an estimate of it can we possess, if nothing whatever of all this happens in us when we read it?

### V

Reading, then, is a form of living because of the things that happen in us when we read.

And since our mothers sang lullabies to us in our cradles, and repeated Mother Goose to us in the nursery, and read us fairy tales before the fire, and told us stories at bedtime, we began to practice this form of living (we began, let us say, to read by proxy) long before we learned our letters.

Here, by the way, is another chance to distinguish between the two kinds of "knowing how to read" — the kind that we are considering in this book, and the kind that the United States census and the dictionary and the primary school have in mind. In the latter sense, you and I know how to read *with our eyes*; and a blind man knows how to read *with his fingers*; and a blind man with both arms amputated cannot know how to read at all. But suppose you were private secretary to an

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

armless blind man. And suppose that you (with your eyes and your vocal chords doing their humdrum tasks, but with your mind and your imagination busy elsewhere) were to read "David Copperfield" aloud to your intensely attentive employer. Which one of you, in the sense of our present inquiry, would you say had read the novel?

### VI

We began, then, to live and (with the aid of a private secretary) we began to read, in the nursery. And we have been reading, as well as living, ever since. We read baby books in words of one syllable when we were toddlers. We read childrens' stories in words of two syllables when we were children. As we grew older we read school primers and textbooks. We read "Alice in Wonderland" and "St. Nicholas." We read Sunday-school scenarios, and the "Youth's Companion," and penny-dreadfuls, and "Treasure Island," and "Little Women," and "The Golden Treasury," and so *on* and so *forth*; *up* and *out* into maturity.

Has there not, perhaps, without our realizing it or thinking anything about it, been a

## HOW TO READ

definite and decipherable relationship between our developing selves and this progressive reading? A linked, organic, vital parallelism between them? Is it not possible that these two forms of living have marched, hand in hand, helping each other along, on an uncharted road that both followed, yet that neither took note of?

And if this should prove true, what better way could we have of obtaining what we are seeking — a sense of direction in our reading — than that of diagramming this past relationship, mapping that part of this road that lies behind us, and then *sighting ahead along these established lines?*

Let us see if we cannot, somehow, find a point of vantage — a mental steeple, or mountain-top, or captive balloon — from which we can get a bird's-eye view of the way we have come.

### VII

J. Henri Fabre, that lovable old French savant with the soul of a poet, the attainments of a scientist, and the attitude of a philosopher, tells us, in one of his wonderful

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

chapters on the life of the spider, how the young of the Banded Epira get their start in the world.

The Banded Epira do not weave webs to snare their prey. They stalk their quarry, tiger-like, on foot; or lie in wait behind the petals of a rose and leap, like micro-jaguars, on the backs of bees that come to drink. But each one of them, none the less, has a silk mill in its abdomen. And it is upon the spinnerets of this factory that the mother spider draws when she weaves the fleece-lined pouch in which she lays her eggs — the cocoon-like pellicule that she fastens beneath a twig at the foot of some spindling bush, and from which, later on, the heat of mid-July calls forth some six hundred pin-points of new-hatched life. And it is with the initial contents of these same spinnerets as their sole capital that these newborn mites start in on the business of living.

No sooner have the six hundred emerged than they set out, *en masse*, to climb the bush. And as this, for such teeny climbers, proves a several days' journey, the tribe, at each day's end, spins itself a shelter which it occupies for

## HOW TO READ

the night and abandons in the morning. And thus, alternately climbing and camping, at last they reach the top. And there, with feverish industry, they build a platform of interwoven strands. And upon this for a time they come and go, busily engaged in some work of preparation. And then — mystery or miracle — for all the world like tiny witches traveling on broomsticks — they are seen, one by one, serenely to depart, floating on nothing through the summer air.

And Fabre tells us how, by means of some ingenious experiments conducted in his study, he at last discovered the simple secret of this aerial dispersion — filaments of silk, so fine as to be invisible to the human eye, paid out to the breeze by each tiny spider until buoyant enough to support him; and then embarked upon, air-ship fashion, for the great adventure.

And I have retold the story here because it is upon just such an embarkation that I am now asking you to join me. Like these spider-lets we have journeyed together, camping by the way, from the bottom of our bush. Like them we have built a sort of platform at the top. And now, like them, we are about to set

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

forth, supported, to the eye of the uninitiated, upon nothing, but really borne securely aloft upon two fine filaments of understanding that we have spun.

Let us examine this air-craft.

The first filament is the knowledge that we are *makers* when we read. That things read are not taken into the mind bodily from without, — sucked in through the eye like soda through a straw, — but are built up, brand-new, within us. That we do this building with assorted fragments of our own experience just as literally as a child builds castles with its wooden blocks. And that, just as the child's block-architecture is conditioned by the quantity and variety of its supply, so the scope of our reading capacity depends upon the amount and variousness of living — of physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual living — that we have done.

The second filament is the knowledge that no matter what we read or when, no matter whether we are conscious of it or not, we always read either to "find ourselves" or to "get away from ourselves." Either from the calculated desire, or from the playful joy, of

## HOW TO READ

establishing some new order in our individual chaos; or for the comfort of forgetting the disorder that has baffled us by turning to some fresh order-making.

These are the wings of our bi-plane.

### VIII

As we look down and back, between these buoyant bits of understanding about the way we read and our reasons for reading, we shall see the past, like a landscape, begin to open out beneath us. We shall see supposedly haphazard choices in our early reading fall into significant relationship to one another. We shall see method emerge from the mix-up. We shall see, finally, that *the way we have come* stretches, like a straight ribbon of road, visible and comprehensible before our eyes.

### IX

We see, for example, why, as little children, we liked to read Mother Goose.

For the youngest child, no less than the wisest savant, reads with its own experience for building-blocks. But the child's experi-



## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

ence is very fragmentary. And, what is more, the fragments are as yet unassorted.

Its mind is like a cupboard without partitions, into which all that it finds with its five senses — the pap-spoon and the puppy-dog, the taste of milk and the feel of stomach-ache, the sound of the cat's *miaow* and the appearance of the moon's disk — are all stowed away, helter-skelter, like loot gathered for a rummage sale.

But though its experience is a jumble, yet already in this jumble the child "knows what it likes." And, moreover, since it lives in a world where there is already "rhyme," though not yet "reason," it already, without knowing it, senses something about "art."

It is not yet equipped to read "Hamlet." It is not even, as yet, equipped to read "Puss in Boots." But it *is* equipped to "produce" on the stage of its own consciousness — and it does take genuine joy in there "producing" — that famous scenario —

"Hey diddle diddle!  
The cat and the fiddle;  
The cow jumped over the moon.  
The little dog laughed to see such sport  
And the dish ran away with the spoon."

## HOW TO READ

And while it is "producing" it, it laughs and claps its hands. For it is establishing a rhythmic order in the jumble of its experience. It is "making new combinations out of its stock in trade," and is thus, according to its infant mood, either "finding itself" amid its chaotic environment, or — forgetting the colic.

### X

We see, again, why it is that the same child, a bit later, reads fairy tales with such gusto.

It has, by now, greatly multiplied its experiences. It has, moreover, begun to discover in others like traits to its own. It has begun to feel pity for others' pain through imagining itself hurt. It has begun to take pleasure in others' joy through imagining itself rejoiced. It has established a tentative (although a largely arbitrary and unwarranted) order in the jumble of its experience. It has grasped the crude principle (although it has not yet learned the hard-and-fast rules) of cause and effect. It has begun to distil ideas, and has developed its instinctive responsiveness to

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

“rhyme” into a budding passion for “poetic justice.” And it is, without knowing it, eager for any opportunity or guidance that will enable it to invest this capital; to arrange and rearrange it in explanatory sequences and satisfying symmetry. It is like a housewife with a kettle of simmering jelly, looking round for moulds to pour it into.

And as such scenarios as “Cinderella” and “The Sleeping Princess” are exactly the moulds it needs, it seizes upon them with avidity and pours its accumulated capital into them with a realism of mental stage management equal to Belasco’s. It lives them — quite literally — with round-eyed wonder and palpitant delight; and in the act it is constructively “finding itself” through self-assertion even when we think that it is only forgetting hurt feelings or a burned finger in the fascination of the inner “movies.”

### XI

Let us glance in passing at boyhood.

Some of you, I know, have before now asked yourselves why your growing boy, leaving the orthodox reading you had so carefully pro-

## HOW TO READ

vided for him in the library, has stolen out to the lean-to behind the woodshed and buried himself in "Tomahawk Bill, the Terror of the Tetons." Doubtless you felt that evil communications had corrupted his native manners. But you were wrong. If you will look down from our air-craft you will see that he did it, not from acquired perversity, but from an inner urge.

He did it for the same reason that the guinea hen "steals her nest" in the woodlot behind the barn.

The guinea hen is half domesticated and half wild. When she "steals her nest" she is dramatizing her wild instincts. The boy is half civilized and half a savage. He reads dime novels to dramatize the imagining that the savage in him has done, or — to forget the "civilizing" that is being done to him.

### XII

And now let us ask ourselves a subtler question. Let us ask why it is that adolescence — youth ripening toward maturity — reads with such glowing sympathy the visions of the poets, and produces with such zest the

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

lighter scenarios of idealism and romance; while only a little later, the same individuals — new-fledged grown-ups now — are so often found demanding plots of stripped action and tales in which, to use their own expression, there is “something doing.”

This, too, viewed from our altitude, is simple.

Youth ripening toward maturity sees itself as the heir to the ages. It conceives the sum of its experience as a completed course of preparation. It is like a hound straining at the leash, or a runner tensed for the start. Its motto is “Just you wait!”

It scorns to use its building-blocks of experience, — the piled-up raw material of its preparedness, — except to build tall towers of what it means to do. It reads romance alternately to dramatize its own intentions, and to forget the tedium of enforced delay.

But it is quite otherwise with new-fledged grown-ups.

From strutting seniors in the University of Youth these have become yelled-at office boys in the department store of Life. From being the “leading citizens” in a land of dreams,

## HOW TO READ

they have become tenderfeet on the frontier of Reality.

It is, indeed, almost permissible to say that they have been born again.

For if the boy (a creature physically active in a world of the imagination) is indeed "father to the man" (the average young man being a creature mentally alert in a world of physical endeavor) — then your newborn adult is a baby. And for a time he reads like a child.

"Stories of action" are the Mother Goose rhymes of young maturity. The cows in them make magnificent leaps. The pussy-cats in them face the music. All the young dogs are elated. And in the end the dish always elopes with the spoon. In short, they are scenarios in which the unassorted fragments of a new, chaotic, "practical" experience are arranged in a *rhythm of accomplishment*.

### XIII

So much, then, for what lies definitely behind us. Let us descend from our flight of observation and take stock of our discoveries.

We have seen that the roads of living and of reading do indeed parallel each other. And

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

that in this parallelism they maintain an active, vital, organic relationship. And that, in the past at least, their joint direction has been the direction of our developing lives.

We have seen, moreover that in traveling these linked roads it behooves us not only to live, but to *out-live*.

Do you, by any chance, doubt this last?

I know a woman of forty-two who still plays at paper dolls, and who still responds with evidently pleasurable shudders to the reading of that earliest of our remembered tragedies, —

“Hickory, dickory, dock!  
The mouse ran up the clock.”

But, “Ah!” you are perhaps saying, “this is an extreme example.”

So be it. Yet you all know, I am sure, men and women of an age approximate to hers who, having been safely born into maturity, went no further; and who still continue to ask, both of life and of letters, merely that “something shall happen on every page.”

Do you not see what has overtaken them?

They have let life cease to be a development and become a treadmill. They have let living cease to be an adventure and become a

## HOW TO READ

habit. And their reading has, of necessity, followed suit.

For although our reading ranges, apparently, much further afield than our lives, the moving centers of their activities coincide. Our living and our reading are like a man and his dog. The man walks along his chosen or his given way. The dog puts rings around him as he moves. Now the dog is ahead, nosing the path. Now it is far behind, re-sniffing the back trail. Now it is off to the right, announcing a treed squirrel. Now it is digging frantically for a ground-hog on the left. But always the center of the dog's activities is the man's moving footsteps. And if the man lies down by the side of the road and falls asleep, sooner or later the dog will come and stretch out beside him.

### XIV

And now, having traced the course of these joint roads behind us, let us see if we cannot, on the same lines, prefigure their course ahead. Let us see if we cannot forecast the general direction of maturity's living-and-reading development.



## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

Physical activity is, after all, only the basis of living; only the foundation — the root, if you prefer — of our emotional, our intellectual, our spiritual development. And it is along this line — it is in this direction if at all — that our development takes place and that our experiences pile up. And it is in circles round our progress along this line that that sheep-dog of our experiences, our reading, moves.

For a time, as we have seen, scenarios of action engross us. But variety of action is circumscribed. The situations of physical accomplishment, juggle them as we may, are limited in number. The meaning of life, we gradually discover, develops for us less through what happens to us from without than through what, as a direct consequence of this, happens to us from within. Our physical activities become ordered. Our emotional experiences accumulate. Sooner or later, therefore, we take to using these building-blocks of experienced emotion in reading books of an emotional appeal.

But the reading of love-stories may also cease to be an adventure and become a habit.

## HOW TO READ

For the situations of emotion are also, both in life and in literature, limited in number. The real variousness of our common humanity lies, not in the differences of our emotions, but in the infinite variety and conjugation of our personal reactions to emotion. Little by little, therefore, as our experienced realization of differences accumulates, we reach out toward the reading of books that marshal these differences — books of an intellectual appeal. Perhaps we begin with *genre* studies and move on to tales of character development. Perhaps we begin with local color effects and move on through parochial literature and books of travel to memoirs, autobiographies, and treatises on historical periods. Perhaps we begin with handbooks of science and move on, through the rudiments of abnormal psychology and the outlines of alien theologies, to the beginnings of speculative philosophy. Or perhaps we pick and choose, push out now on this side now on that — read anything and everything, in short, that, overlapping in some measure our familiar lives and extending a bit beyond into the unknown, enables us to orient ourselves a little in an in-

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

finitely interesting world, or to forget, by constructing these oases of deciphered orderliness, the immediate disorder that baffles us nearer home.

And here, at first glance, it would seem that we are come to the parting of the ways.

Thus far, we will have jogged along together on a common road. But now that the highway breaks up into a maze of cart tracks, now that one of us may take the trail of science, another that of sociology, another that of fiction, or of esthetics, or of history, or of philosophy, it may seem that we shall never meet again.

But this need not be so.

To discover this it is only necessary for us to go on, each in his own way, with the twin adventures of living and reading.

For, choose what by-ways you will, pursue as many of them as you can, you will find at last that they all give over their fanlike dispersing and begin to bend inward toward reunion — a reunion hidden beneath the horizon, but ever more and more definable in location by the simple geometry of this convergence.

## HOW TO READ

For the ultimate meaning of life inheres, not in the multiplicity of differences that superficially distinguish us, but in the deeper oneness of the common humanity that we share and into which these differences coalesce. And the final miracle of existence lies, not in the swarming diversity of living forms, and in the diverse laws of their separate being, but in the final unity of their relationship to the insoluble Purpose of their common Source.

Sooner or later, therefore, the persistent explorers of the by-ways learn to use their accumulated building-blocks of experienced diversity for the reading of books dealing with unifying relationships — books not of analysis, but of synthesis — books which, in a human instead of a theological sense, we must call books of a spiritual appeal: — the great novel scenarios of the deep-seeing, the great philosophic card-castles of the thinkers, the great poetic prophecies of the seers, the many-sided gospels of the elect.

### XV

Here, then, is the sense of direction that we have been seeking.

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

But it is more than a sense of direction. It is the road itself. It is the inclusive highway of all our individual adventures. For it is the unbuoyed but inevitable channel of the mind. Along it, if we are to move at all, we must make our way. And while it is wide enough to accommodate us all, and deep enough to float genius itself, yet no flat-bottomed skiff of human intelligence is of such light draught that it will not ground on the mud flats at the channel's edge if the course be lost.

The woman referred to some pages back, the one of forty-odd who still plays at paper dolls and chortles over nursery rhymes, is hard aground at the very entrance to the fair-way — the machinery of her mind, poor soul, disabled in a collision between her head and the carriage-block when the nurse dropped her at the age of two.

But there are more kinds of arrested development than are diagnosed by the doctors.

Those other women — there are thousands of them — who never read anything but love-stories — the same old love-stories with the same old plots and the same old situations, everlastingly ripped and turned and sponged

## HOW TO READ

and pressed and refurbished and retrimmed, but always modeled on the same adolescent dream and the same sixteen-year-old idealism — they too are hard aground a few years up the course.

And those men — there are thousands of them — who vary the breakfast business-beer-garden-bed treadmill by reading endless successions of adventure tales and detective yarns and pipe-dreams of exotic action — “because they help to pass the time” — they too are keel-fast: grounded on the bar between an over-ripe adolescence and an undeveloped maturity. They are like mathematicians who spend their skill counting sheep to put themselves to sleep.

### XVI

But it is neither the nursery rhymes, nor the love-stories, nor the adventure scenarios that are at fault.

All these things “belong.”

No illusion or delusion, no dream or desire, no crude instinct or unfolding impulse or conscious ideal that is native to humanity, is outside the legitimate field of our realization and

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

re-realization through reading — of our repeated “redding up” and of our progressive formulation for ourselves in the constantly accumulating terms of our own experience.

The only fault, the fatal fault, is stagnation — arrested development.

Nor does this mean that we should leave nursery rhymes behind, and love-stories, and adventure tales. We should n't. Not any more than we should kill the “child” in us, or the lover, or the sense of adventure. We should carry these things with us and develop them as we develop. There are nursery rhymes for every mile of the way. There are love-stories for every stage of growth. There are adventures for every enlargement of our consciousness and our understanding.

### XVII

But perhaps you will be asking why I have called this channel “unbuoyed” when there are so many guide-marks set up by earlier voyagers, so many charts of the best reading, so many pilot-critics ready to come aboard and steer for us.

## HOW TO READ

I am not for a moment suggesting that you should discard any of these aids to navigation. But if you will recall our discovery as to how we get our meanings for words — by reacting spontaneously to them and subsequently criticizing the reactions; and if you will remember our noting the similar source of all life's meanings for us — the subsequent weighing and valuing of our actual, spontaneous, personal responses to life's stimuli; and if you will remember our final conclusion that "culture" in any form is only derivable from books at all because reading is a form of living in that things actually happen in us when we read, — you will see why I used this word.

All these buoyed courses of reading, all these charts of other voyagings, all these authorities on the shortest routes to selected destinations, invaluable as they are and most needful to be used by us to the fullest of their real power to serve us, are, and can only be, *aids to intelligent experimentation on our individual parts.*

For what actually happens in us when we read, and the way we combine these actual happenings with all that has previously hap-



## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

pened in us both in living and reading — this is the sole, the determining, the final reality for each of us. And when we have studied all the charts there are, when we have listened to all the advice that is offered to us, all actual progress toward our ultimate destination (whatever that may be) is made by our pushing ahead, up channel, and *taking soundings as we go*.

### XVIII

It is no part of the purpose of this book to influence your choice of a goal.

We all start from the same port and none of us are "bound through" — for the channel is longer than our individual lives and lengthens with the life of the race. But we sail, under sealed orders, bound for many havens. No two of us have the same equipment, the same driving power, the same draught, or the same radius of possible attainment. We are all born with a multitude of latent tendencies. We develop, or fail to develop, these in different orders and in different degrees as we go. And as we variously increase this development, we variously enlarge our outlooks and alter

## HOW TO READ

our conscious objectives. And there are as many resultant routes as there are points of destination and people moving toward them.

But it is all the same from the standpoint of our present inquiry.

Our aim in reading may be the most aimless pursuit of pleasure. Or it may be the most concentrated utilitarian seeking for knowledge. Or it may be the most many-sided desire for self-enhancement through coördinated understanding. It may all be done through "wanting to forget," or through "wanting to play," or through "wanting to know," or through such alternations or combinations of these reasons as develop with our development. It makes no difference to our present inquiry. For the force behind any one of these urges, or the force behind any possible combination of them, can only expend itself either in driving us along some personal line of development in the direction that we have just determined and have called the inevitable channel of the mind, or in driving us rudderlessly round and round some vicious circle of stagnation.

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

### XIX

Fortunately we now hold in our hands two mariners' instruments of precision to help us in navigating this channel — a sextant with which to locate our position on the course, and a compass to tell us when we are headed right.

Standing at noon with a sextant to his eye, the sailor, by measuring the height of the sun above the ocean's rim, can figure his latitude in mid-Atlantic. And any one of us who will measure, with the glass of honest self-scrutiny, the height of his interest in life above the mean level of new-fledged grown-up-ism, can locate his position on the chart and stick a pin in it.

As for the compass, it is a delicate instrument, but very simple. In reading, as we are now aware, we know but two urges to action. The first of these, the impulse to "find ourselves," no matter how casual or how concentrated its manifesting may be, is always in some shape a seeking for truth. To the second, the impulse to "escape from ourselves," two courses are open. It may turn from a truth-quest that has tired us to a truth-quest that

## HOW TO READ

stimulates, amuses, or allures — may seek a change of truth, like a city-dweller seeking the sea, or a hillsman descending to the plains. Or it may turn from the discouragement of living to the anodyne of reading lies about life.

And the arrow of this interest impulse, forever oscillating on the pivot of our mood, is the needle of the compass. When, and only when, it swings toward truth, it points the channel.

And "truth"?

Inevitably at this point the Pontius Pilate in us — the finite in us, saving its face before the infinite — shrugs its shoulders and asks the unanswerable question, "What *is* Truth?"

But let us not drag this metaphysical anise-seed bag across the trail of our inquiry.

A human philosopher, trying to take in Truth with a capital *T* in order to define it, is like a Spanish mackerel, trying to swallow the ocean in which it swims in order to comprehend it. Many fishes have drowned and many philosophers gone mad in the frantic gluttony of these ambitions. So let us be at once more moderate and more practical. Let

## A SENSE OF DIRECTION

us write "truth" with the lower case *t* of our mortal limitations and define it in terms of the only pursuit of it that is open to us — a seeking-out of the discoverable relationships between the world inside us and the world without.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WORLD OUTSIDE US AND THE WORLD WITHIN

#### I

THE pursuit of truth as we have just defined it — the searching-out of discoverable relationships between the life within us and the life without — is not a new or a specialized activity that is here being presented as worthy of your attention. On the contrary, it is another of those things that we have all been doing — another of those basic, inevitable, and universal activities that we have all been engaged in, sometimes consciously, but far more often without realizing it, in every hour of our lives and in every paragraph of our reading.

And it is the purpose of the present chapter to do three things: (1) To bring home to each of us, in the familiar and recognizable terms of our common knowledge and experience, the fact that the searching-out of these relationships is, quite simply and literally, the essen-

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

tial reality of what we are actually and constantly doing when we read. (2) To show the immense advantage we can gain for ourselves by reading with this understanding as an operative part of our equipment. And (3) to point out a few practical ways of applying the lever of this advantage in our actual practice.

### II

We all realize at once that the investigations and experiments of a Pasteur are searchings for relationships between the life inside us and the life outside.

We see at a glance that the physician, and the bacteriologist, and the organic chemist, and the comparative psychologist, and the philosopher, and the theologian, are all, quite literally, pursuing truth in these terms.

But we do not, as a rule, realize that every man and woman who reads in the morning paper a paragraph describing a tenement fire, or a society ball, or a murder in the slums, is doing the same thing. Indeed, if we happen never to have thought of the matter from this angle, this statement of it appears wholly absurd to us. The idea involved is one that

## HOW TO READ

we have never "distilled" and have n't in stock. It is an idea that cannot, by being stated, be put into our heads. But it happens to be a realization the necessary ingredients of which we now have on hand and can therefore proceed to compound.

### III

If there is one fact that we have grown thoroughly to understand and accept, it is the fact that we have nothing to read with except our own experience — the seeing and hearing and smelling and tasting and touching that we have done; the fearing and hoping and hating and loving that has happened in us; the intellectual and spiritual reactions that have resulted; and the assumptions, understandings, prides, prejudices, hypocrisies, fervors, foolishnesses, finenesses, and faiths that have thereby been precipitated in us like crystals in a chemist's tube.

We are all, therefore, quite ready to nod our heads in agreement over the statement that we read in terms of mental conceptions made out of this accumulated experience, just as a child builds castles from its wooden blocks.



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

We are, in other words, agreed upon the character of our building-material.

But we have not, as yet, turned the spotlight of our inquiry upon the character of these buildings themselves. We have not yet, except by the vaguest of implications, determined what it is that these outwardly dissimilar structures, that we are forever building up and tearing down again on the nursery floors of our imagination, really represent. And this is the question that we are now about to ask ourselves.

When we rustle the pages of the "Morning Advertiser" or open the "Evening Howl"; when we read the current numbers of our favorite magazines; when we enter the lists with Ivanhoe or camp with Achilles before Troy; when we repeople the cave-man's cave or fore-furnish the mansions of the blessed, — what is the real character of the castles we are rearing with our building-blocks of past experience?

Let us put the cart before the horse and face the answer before we pursue the inquiry: All these structures represent ourselves.

Of course I know that in reading this sen-

## HOW TO READ

tence you are setting me down as a cynic. You have an uncomfortable feeling that I am "knocking" human nature. You would like to think that you are a bit bruised in your idealism. But I have hopes of regaining your confidence. For, to begin with, it is not the essential *you* that is shocked by this statement; it is some of those "assumptions, prejudices, and hypocrisies that have been precipitated in you" that are shocked. The essential you makes an involuntary motion of recognition toward the statement and is shamefacedly ready, somehow, to rejoice in it. And, as we shall see presently, the essential you is eminently right. For it *is* ourselves — ourselves subdivided and reassembled, ourselves dressed up and disguised and commissioned to play a part, ourselves outfitted and sent forth on adventure-tours of investigation, and then recalled to make reports — that we read with. And in this complex and many-mannered reaching out and harking back it is ourselves that we are, in endless alternation, building into and building out of the world as we go.

But let me introduce you to a young castle-builder that I met the other day.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

### IV

He was standing, straddle-legged, on Riverside Drive, looking down to one of the jutting piers from which covered carts of ashes were being dumped into waiting scows. He was about five — dressed in a sort of tight-fitting union suit, hand-knitted out of white wool. And as I passed him I heard him announce to his nurse in tones of irrevocable decision, "When I'm big I'm going to be an ashman."

Now the chances are that before the news of his determination reaches you he will have changed his mind. He may even, meanwhile, have made and unmade other choices of profession. And the odds are overwhelmingly in favor of his ultimately turning out something widely different from them all — say a stockbroker. But somewhere, deep down inside the bank president or bookkeeper that he and Life will some day compromise on his becoming, there will remain that ashman possibility — that undeveloped ashman-self — that I recently saw him in the act of realizing. There will remain, also, the policeman possibility,

## HOW TO READ

and the possibilities of the engine-driver, the plumber's assistant, the recruiting sergeant, the drum major, and the sandwich man, each of which he will for a while have seen himself capable of being. And there will remain other deep-buried possibilities. Hundreds—thousands—of possibilities and of combinations of them. There will be possibilities that he will have glimpsed and forgotten. There will be possibilities that he will have developed a little and abandoned. There will be possibilities the existence of which he will never have so much as suspected. In short, there will be in him the more or less undeveloped germs of all the innumerable *potential* selves that life, as he will have lived it, will have given him no chance to be.

And this, at the moment that you read these words, is true of you. It is true of me as I write them. It is true of us all. We are populous with unrealized selves: with might-have-been's; with partially-were's; with sometimes-are's; with may-yet-be's. And the character-structures that we rear when we are reading are working models of these potential selves.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

### V

When, a moment since, I spoke of "entering the lists with Ivanhoe," I spoke inaccurately on purpose in order, now, to call your attention to the truth. We do not "enter the lists with Ivanhoe." We enter the lists *as* Ivanhoe. When we read Homer, we do not "camp with Achilles before Troy." What really happens is this: Out of the experience-material at our command, — out of our visits to militia encampments, perhaps, and to museums, out of our own tent experience on fishing trips or at garden parties, out of our memories of pictures and our realizations from other reading, — we contrive the Homeric encampment on the Trojan plain. We erect, more or less vividly and informedly according to our habit and our equipment, the hero's tent with the shields hung upon its outer walls and the spears set up before its tight-closed door. And having done all this we install therein a working model of Achilles made out of our own attributes. It is not Achilles who hides behind that imagined canvas. It is some quickly achieved amalgam of our touchy selves and

## HOW TO READ

of the potential hero lurking in us, that sulks there while the armies wait. And it is the same when we read of a murder in the "Evening Howl." It is not the actual murderer who then reenacts his crime, or the actual victim who dies another death. It is the potential assassin in us who lifts a knife, and the potential victim in us who shudders as she drops.

And yet, this is only half the truth.

For having, out of our own potentialities, made an Ivanhoe to ride into the lists, we retire, as it were, to the side-lines and watch the Ivanhoe we have created and sent forth. Having contrived a personal and heroically sulky Achilles out of our own attributes, we straightway scale the imagined walls of Troy and look down with new eyes upon the ancient world. Having made a murderer and a victim out of the might-have-been's and the may-yet-be's within us, we sit, as it were, in reserved seats at our own movies, and experience (in varying degrees according to our natures and our moods at the moment) the passions of participants and the emotions of onlookers.

In fine, having, at the instigation of the author, explored a new corner of the world

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

within us and made a new synthesis of what we found there, we proceed, in the person of the character thus created, to explore new aspects of the outer world.

### VI

Let us pause a moment, here, to draw a subtle yet highly important distinction. In every elaborate narrative, historical, fictional, or what-not, there are figures — men, women, and children — that we visualize, whose words we listen to, whose actions we vitagraph, whose very heft and bulk and, it may be, contact with ourselves, we vividly realize and are aware of; yet with whom we do not at all, in the sense above set forth, identify ourselves. And the fact that we do not, any more than if they were trees or houses or other inanimate portions of the external world, construct these figures as *working models of our potential selves*, may seem, at first glance, to vitiate the analysis and exposition above arrived at.

But a moment's consideration will suffice to give us the explanation. *These figures are mere objects in the external world.* The fact that

## HOW TO READ

they are animate objects — the fact that they are animate human objects even — does not in the least alter their relation of externality to the character or characters with whom for the moment we are ourselves identified.

But mark the change that may, at any moment, take place in the equilibrium of our attitude. Let one of these figures cease to be a mere animated object in the story's world, and become, for a page or a paragraph even, *the experiencing subject of the story's emotions*, let one of them change, for so little as two minutes, from being a part of that outer-world-that-is-being-explored and become the explorer, and instantly we begin to "judge him by ourselves," to "put ourselves in his place." In the one case we construct these figures, exactly as we construct the trees and houses, the horses and cattle of the story's requirements, from the stored observation and accumulated materialism of our past experience. In the other we construct them, no matter how fleetingly and sketchily, as vicarious embodiments of our potential selves. In the one case we regard them as a part of that "world outside us" with which we are seeking



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

discoverable relationships. In the other case we regard them as a phase of the "world within us" momentarily dramatized and engaged in the search.

### VII

And this brings us to a point where, as the children say, we are "very warm." We are now so near to the idea that we have set out to grasp and make our own that we should only need, if we knew the way, to reach out the fingers of our minds and curl them round it.

We have discovered the character of the buildings that we are constantly erecting, as we read, out of the building-blocks of our past living. We know now that all these structures represent, either phases of the world within us, or phases of the world without. And we know that in all our reading we are in some manner confronting *some potentiality of our own* with *some conceivable situation*. As yet, it is true, we have only demonstrated these facts with regard to fiction, history, epic poetry, or some form of *narrative* composition. But we shall shortly satisfy ourselves that the same conditions hold true in the reading of the

## HOW TO READ

driest scientific treatise or of the most abstract philosophical speculation.

It only remains, therefore, for us to convince ourselves — not on the authority of some one's say-so, but from our own criticism of our own experience — that the actual relevancy to ourselves of these constantly varied confrontations, and the source of the enjoyment derived from making them, lies, as we have assumed, in their being seekings-out of discoverable relationships between the two worlds from which they are taken.

Let us see if we can do this.

You and I and almost every American of our generation have, at some flaming moment of realization, thanked God that he or she had not been handicapped as was Helen Keller; and have marveled at the triumph of her almost incredible climbing out of the prison of herself into consciousness of the world and into communion with her fellow men. And it is even possible to ask ourselves whether, had Miss Keller not been vouchsafed the few months of sight and hearing that were hers in infancy, she could later on have been released from her solitary confinement.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

But we are less likely to have realized that, at the instant of birth, every one of us is imprisoned, *incomunicado*, in our undeveloped selves; and that it is not in initial situation, but in means at hand for escape from that situation, that we differ from a child born into eternal darkness and unbreakable silence.

For we, unlike such a misfortunate, are born into a world visibly peopled by our kind. From the first, the instructions of our instincts are supplemented by impulses of imitativeness derived from without. We see, with uncomprehending eyes, long before we are consciously stirred to perception. We suck in explanations through our senses long before we know that we are to have need of them. But such a Helen Keller as we have imagined, having almost no way of recognizing the existence of others, would have almost no way of picking the lock of her own meaning. It would not merely be that the things that touched her body would be non-existent to her except as contacts: the very things that she touched herself with—her own fingers and toes—would be inexplicable to her because she knew no others like them.

## HOW TO READ

We have all, in our time, thrilled at the thought of Robinson Crusoe, discovering in the sand of his island beach a footprint that was not his own. But think of some Helen Keller, marooned before she was born on a far more isolate island, stretching out what she did not know was a human hand and finding in the void a face the facsimile of hers!

That face we can think of as her first book. It would be printed in raised characters for the blind. Slowly, like one spelling out unfamiliar words, we can imagine her reading its features in terms of her own. And then, in the two-edged moment of final realization, we can imagine her first conception of personal identity unfold into her first inkling of an ordered world.

### VIII

But let me tell you of an actual experience of my own.

Little by little, when I was a boy, I became conscious of the fact that in learning the alphabet, and in learning to count, I had somehow involuntarily assigned positions in space to the letters and numerals of these series.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

Indeed I had built these letters and numerals into definite and visualizable structures, which never changed, which were almost always present at the back of my consciousness when I was dealing with letters or numbers, and upon which, as upon a scaffolding, I located say the letter *P*, or the number 45, when I had occasion to deal with either as a part of a system. Thus the numerals from 1 to 11 were to me a set of steps that led up to a platform that was 12. Between this platform and another (which was 20) the teens, like a rope ladder, hung in a sagging curve. And from 20 to 100 the figures climbed in a series of rigid scaling-ladders of nine rungs each, that were set up between platforms that receded as they rose. The alphabet, on the other hand, ran directly away from me, rising and falling like a one-track scenic railway. Even the Lord's Prayer was organized. It ran down, like a trail into some cañon, from "Our Father," at the top in the sun, to a dark, deep bottom where "Amen" echoed in the gloom.

And as I grew older, and no one in my hearing ever mentioned having such notions, I came to assume that no one had them. I be-

## HOW TO READ

gan to fancy myself, in this respect, different from my kind — mentally deformed. The consciousness of the thing became a secret trouble of which I was ashamed; and there were even times when I wondered if it might not be the beginning of insanity.

And then, on a happy evening, a young physician of my adolescent acquaintance happened in the course of conversation to mention this almost universal child-habit of contriving space-symbols for mind-sequences. He spoke of the fact that as we grow up we gradually cease to need them, and hence discard and forget them; so that many people in later life are quite unconscious of ever having had or used them. He asked me whether, by chance, I still remembered mine.

Can you not imagine the eagerness with which I described to him my prayer-cañon, my numerical scaling-ladders, my alphabetical scenic railway? Can you not picture the interest with which I leaned over his shoulder while he took pencil and paper and drew for me diagrams of his own symbol-conceptions and of those of others?

For myself, I shall never forget that even-

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

ing. For on it, like the Helen Keller we have imagined, I reached out into the dark and found a duplicate of myself. On it I got my first inkling of the truth I am here illustrating for you.

### IX

For it is only as members of a species that we are comprehensible to our own intelligence.

It is only by our likeness to others that we understand ourselves. It is only by their likeness to us that we understand others. And these two understandings are not independent of each other and separate. They are complementary to each other and reciprocal — like the indrawing and exhaling of our breath. The life within us and the life without are halves of a whole.

Of course it may occur to you to challenge the statement that we only arrive at an understanding either of ourselves or of one another through our mutual *resemblances*; because, for each one of us, so large a part of these reciprocal understandings consists of estimated *differences*. But these differences,

## HOW TO READ

when we come to sift them, always turn out to be differences of degree and never differences of kind. To you, a ruby lantern suspended in darkness may be a jewel and a joy; while a green lantern, similarly placed, may be almost a matter of indifference. And to me these conditions may be reversed. Yet if we compare notes we readily understand each other. But a man who was color blind, and to whom, in consequence, red and green were utterly and forever undistinguishable, could only make shift to understand our feelings in regard to them by telling himself that, whatever they were, they must be of a nature analogous to his own feelings in regard to blue and orange. And a man born blind, although from repeated assurances he might have come to accept it as a fact that he was somehow different from us others, could never in the remotest sense conceive the nature of the difference.

### X

And what we have thus come to realize as true in regard to the life we share with other humans, is equally true of the life we share in



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

a less complete manner with all that is animate on earth. It is through their disclosed resemblances to ourselves, and by our consequent fragmentary ability to "put ourselves in their places," that alone we are able to understand the impulses that move these other lives and to estimate the differences in degree that mark the gulfs between us.

And I hope that at this point you will cry out in protest against my apparent neglect of our manifest ability to know the "facts" about an insect or an animal without in the least understanding it or caring to. For this brings us face to face with the last point necessary to be elucidated for the complete grasping of the idea that we are engaged in introducing "into our heads."

For the only means we have of "knowing the facts" about an insect or an animal, is the noting of the relationships that it bears to the material world—that is to say, to *the environment that we share in common with it*. And our sole means of acquiring knowledge, understanding, or mastery over this environment—over the world without us—or of instinctively and progressively adapting ourselves

## HOW TO READ

to its iron-clad requirements, is the conscious or unconscious seeking-out of its relationships to ourselves — to the world within us. For these two worlds are also halves of a whole.

### XI

Just as it is true, then, that it is only as members of a species that we—or it—are comprehensible to our own intelligence; so it is true that it is only as members of the physical universe that we as such members, or it as such a universe, are in any measure to be grasped by us.

And exactly as we read a novel, or a history, or an epic, or any narrative of human activity, by confronting successive “characters,” — successive dramatized syntheses of our own inner selves, — with various aspects of the world and of life, so we read a work on mathematics, or a description of a mechanical device, or a speculation in abstract science or philosophy, by *confronting successive syntheses of our previously gathered perceptions and ideas on the subject* with the successive new conditions proposed by the author.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

We do not read this way because we have studied the matter out and have determined that it is a good way to do. We do it because we are built that way and have to. We read this way because, the world within us and the world without being related as they are, it is the only way we have of reading. And all of our reactions to reading — all our laughter and tears, all our elations and depressions, all our delights and disgusts, our acceptances and rejections, our understandings and perceptions and acquiescences and disagreements — are the direct and sole result of supposedly discovered relationships between these two worlds, made in the course of these mental and imaginative confrontations. Thus laughter is a reaction to relationships *discovered where they were least expected*, or to relationships appearing to exist, but *suddenly discovered to be preposterous*.

### XII

And now, before we go on to consider the advantages we can gain by making this idea that we have now grasped an operative element in our actual reading, let us pause a

## HOW TO READ

moment and look back, with this new understanding in mind, at the separate steps of our earlier inquiry. We shall see that the facts that we have there successively established are beginning to join hands in a ramifying network of significance, and that our previous conclusions are already establishing among themselves cross-references of connection.

When, for example, we recall the first chapter of this book, we see more many-sidedly than at first why it is *only through the story that we tell ourselves that an author's story* gains meaning for us.

When we remember our examination into the function of the dictionary, we see fresh reasons why we have constantly to contrive *new meanings of our own for the words of others*.

When we now look back at those vague and egotistical sounding phrases, "a desire to find ourselves" and a desire to "get away from ourselves," we find that we have acquired a more complex but also a more ordered conception of the true meanings of these expressions; and that the sanctions that underlie them have become less questionable to us.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

We see, also, more clearly and comprehendingly why it is that only those "meanings" (which is to say those ideas of relationship) that we have first internally felt and then objectively criticized (which is to say measured up with other accepted meanings and relationships) can — whether they be the meanings of words or the meaning of the world — become a part of individual culture for us.

We see new reasons why that sense of direction which we defined for ourselves in the last chapter, and found to coincide with the line of development of the individual and the race, is not a matter of our arbitrary choice, but of inherent necessity — why it is that we must somehow move along it, or somewhere stagnate on the way.

We see, as we could not see at the beginning of the present chapter, that the living that we ourselves do is never really comprehended by us until (with or without the aid of books) we have read and re-read it into other lives; and that the infinitely various livingness of others is never really grasped by us until we have read and re-read it into as many as may be of

## HOW TO READ

those potential selves that life has denied us the chance to be.

And we see, finally, that "the adventure of learning to read," that we spoke of on an earlier page, — the lifelong adventure of learning progressively to reemploy the living that we do for the further exploring of these two infinitely interesting worlds, — is not two adventures, but the inseparable halves of one adventure.

### XIII

And now we come to the second point of our present discussion — the advantages that will accrue to us if we make deliberate use of this idea in our reading.

We have seen that all our reactions to reading, no matter how momentary or how momentous they may be, are in reality reactions to relationships consciously realized or unconsciously sensed as existing, either directly between some aspect of our inner selves and some aspect of the outer world, or directly between various aspects of the outer world, each of which bears its own relation to our inner selves. And what we are really asking our-

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

selves is how (since we seem to achieve these reactions instinctively and spontaneously and without taking thought about them) it can possibly advantage us deliberately to note their nature and consciously to inquire from time to time into their hidden meanings.

And the answer (which is twofold) is based on the fact that we are forced by the very conditions of our being either to read on into new realizations of relationship, or to read round and round in the worn circle of those we have. And the first half of this answer is that every road of reading, no matter what its character may be or what may be our purpose in following it, will sooner or later *be blocked for us by unrealized relationships* unless we learn little by little to deal recognizingly and inquiringly with relationships as they arise. And the second half of the answer is that every relationship thus consciously noted and more or less criticized and coördinated with others of its kind, becomes a part of our reading capital — becomes a building-block in itself, employable at need either as a unit in future constructions, or as an entering wedge in future analyses.

## HOW TO READ

### XIV

And this brings us to our third point — the problem of method.

How are we to set about developing this seeking-out of relationships into an actively operative factor in our actual reading, without making a labor of what should be an engrossing adventure and a zestful satisfying of our natural appetites?

And before attempting to answer this question — before indicating a practicable approach to a method whose later developments are always individual adaptations of personal means to personal ends — it will be well for us to place before ourselves, on the one hand, a reminder, and, on the other hand, a caution.

Let us be careful to remember, then, that to speak of our inborn and instinctive craving for recognized relationships between our complex selves and our involved environment as a "natural appetite," is by no means a figure of speech. For a natural appetite is exactly what this craving is. It is as basic and as actual an appetite as that for food. And just as we are guided to the seeking of food by



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

hunger, so we are guided to the seeking of relationships by curiosity. And just as we judge the food we find, primarily by our uncriticized likes and dislikes of its taste and smell, so we judge the relationships we discover, primarily by our uncriticized likes and dislikes of their implications. And just as we alter our appreciations and modify our habits in regard to food, and are influenced in our later attitudes toward it by subtle matters of digestive results and gustatory education, so we gradually reorganize our standards of value and extend our range of enjoyment in the seeking of relationships, influenced thereto by the accumulating understandings that are the result of intellectual digestion. And this fact—this appetite-relation that curiosity bears to our reading—it will be well for us to keep in mind.

The caution that we must remember, on the other hand, is that all development, along such lines and by such steps as we are about to examine, *is* a development and must be gone through stage by stage. The juggler who holds us fascinated by the easy dexterity with which he keeps eleven balls cascading in the air

## HOW TO READ

above his hands, did not begin with eleven. He began with two — acquiring, so to say, a muscular familiarity with the relations between them and his hands before adding a third ball and beginning to master the relationships thus complicated. How much more, then, is it necessary for us to be modest in our beginnings in acquiring control over these far more tricky and more mutually interdependent playthings, the relationships with which we are now dealing?

### XV

The first rule, then, that it behooves us to observe for a gradual, unforced, yet effective approach to this better reading, is that we must learn to look upon our curiosity as the *prompting of our mental hunger*. We must, little by little, learn to *value our curiosity* just as we learn, little by little, to value “appetite.” And we must learn, little by little, to exercise something of the same common sense and common caution in the satisfying of the one that we do in the satisfying of the other.

The French have a proverb which says that the man who does not understand his own

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

stomach at thirty is a fool. Let us be honest enough to apply this aphorism to our minds also.

### XVI

It should not, by now, be necessary, but it may none the less be wise, to point out that any reading that we do which is undertaken through some impulse of "wanting to know" is directly motivated by curiosity. And that any reading that we do which is undertaken through some impulse of "wanting to play" is motivated by that form of potential curiosity that we call "keenness" and which is at the very least a *readiness to be interested*. And that no reading undertaken through any impulse of "wanting to forget" can really become effective of its object unless one or other of these forms of curiosity shall, like hunger aroused by eating, be stirred to life in us by the act of reading.

Curiosity, then, is the only conscious stimulus we have to begin with; and it continues to be, throughout whatever reading development may come to us, the underlying motive-power back of all our seekings, all our find-

## HOW TO READ

ings, and all our passings-on. And the *intention* of our first rule is the practical applying of this knowledge, by gradually learning to regard as an appetite all curiosity or keenness that impels us toward reading, and to regard all the reading that we do as in some sort a satisfying of an appetite.

But this being understood, it must be noted that overt curiosity and anticipatory keenness, and developing interest, are all, when we begin a book or a magazine article or what-not, apt to be of a general or "blanket" variety; and are apt, in the main, to develop cumulatively along some central and specialized axis; as when, as we frequently say, we become "so interested in a story" that we can "hardly wait to see how it comes out." And we shall have occasion later on to consider the guiding of our curiosity in regard both to the developing relationships involved in a story's unfolding and to the criticizing of indicated conclusions involved in a story's ending. But for the moment we must pass these larger matters by in order to examine certain minor manifestations of curiosity or interest that more immediately concern us.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

Please note, then, that, even in reading the most engrossing story in the world, the swift surface of the main stream of our interest is constantly flecked by floating feelings of liking and disliking; is constantly flawed by little upwelling bubbles of inquiry; is constantly dimpled by tiny whirlpools of *subsidiary curiosities*, — curiosities as to why's and wherefore's and probabilities and fittingness, — all of which, as we now know, are instinctive sensings or half-conscious reachings-out after relationships. And this fact, so universally common in the experience of us all, yet so frequently regarded with impatience or indifference, brings us to the formulation of our second rule.

### XVII

For these floating flecks of liking and disliking, these momentary impulses of inquiry that appear for a second like bubbles on the surface of our attention, these little swirls of curiosity that form, and are lost again as we read on, are not only the actual, concrete embodiments of those *spontaneous reactions* to "meanings" that we discussed in an earlier

## HOW TO READ

chapter; but they constitute our natural promptings toward the kind of reading — the reading that is an adventurous seeking-out of relationships between our two worlds — that we are here discussing.

Our second rule, therefore, is that we must *learn to evaluate our subsidiary curiosities*.

How often has it not happened to each of us, in hurrying across some stone-paved station or down some mosaic-floored hallway, to hear a little tinkle as of metal on marble behind us, and to half-wonder for a second what it was, and then, the next day, perhaps, to miss some trinket that we valued and to say, "There! That must have been what dropped when I heard that noise!"

The promptings of our subsidiary curiosities as we read are the tinkling sounds of relationships dropping in our paths.

### XVIII

"But," you may exclaim, "if I am to interrupt my reading every time that I am conscious of a like or a dislike, every time I experience a tendency toward inquiry, every time I am conscious of a blur of puzzlement

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

or twinge of curiosity, what is to become of the 'merged series' of my 'mental movies'? *I want to read my book.* I don't want to run an intellectual detective agency!"

And this objection, if any such procedure were required of us, would be eminently well taken. But happily this is not the case. We must learn to value our subsidiary curiosities, but, as we shall presently see, there is a very simple and practical way of discriminating between them. Moreover, a large majority of these collateral stirrings of our interest and curiosity that are prompted by our reading, are actually dealt with by such instant and hardly noticed mental gestures as that described in the case of our reading of the sentence, "The bond that held them together was thus a spiritual tie."

You will now see, by the way, that the "meaning" problem involved in that sentence was, in reality, a relationship problem.

It is true that the beginner, who is for the first time trying consciously to improve his methods of reading along these lines, will on occasion be rendered self-conscious by his new realization of the multiplicity of such prompt-

## HOW TO READ

ings. But in practice he will soon find that most of these matters are being dealt with without, so to put it, his mind's bothering him about them. For in all our activities, mental as well as physical, there is a constantly shifting focus of conscious attention, upborne by a whole sub-system of unconscious adequacy and action. And one of the first things that an observer learns about his mind action in reading is that, while the conscious focus of his intelligence is "reading his book," another, half-conscious portion of his mental activity is engaged in correcting slight errors of understanding, picking up dropped stitches of minor relationship, and generally "redding up" and keeping things decently shipshape behind him as he goes along.

And as this rear-guard portion of one's reading activity is quite as dependent as the other upon one's reading capital of past experience, of already realized relationships, and of previously cross-referenced understandings, the longer one practices the better and more purposeful reading we are considering, the more quick-witted and efficient and joyously industrious does this half-conscious



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

portion of our mind become in the prosecution of its humble yet vastly important work.

### XIX

Yet the fact remains that there are many promptings of our subsidiary curiosity with which this half-conscious and essentially co-operative portion of our minds is incapable of dealing. There are, indeed, many more of them than we have either time or need to deal with at all. And so we must discover some touchstone of discrimination.

We do not, as a matter of fact, and because we have lost a few locketts and cigarette cases and knives and gold coins by neglecting the tinkle they made in falling, go about forever after investigating every sound we hear behind us, or eternally slapping all our pockets in turn to make sure that we are missing nothing. We learn, after a while, to discriminate between tinkles. And this discernment is the problem we are now facing. Moreover it involves, and brings down to the test of actual practice (as I hope you will see) some of those shrewd distinctions between conscious and unconscious performance that we have previ-

## HOW TO READ

ously discussed, and some of the principles of *deliberate criticism and control of spontaneous reactions to what we read* that we have already inquired into.

### XX

Here, then, is our third rule — a rule upon which, in the beginning, we can safely rely for a conservative yet valid discrimination and for a gradual but effective habit-forming:

*Never neglect any prompting of subsidiary curiosity that is, of itself, sharp enough to shift, though only for a few seconds, the conscious focus of your reading attention.*

Never, for instance, if you are moved to wonder whether or not you would, in his place, have acted as a character in your story is supposed to act, fail to weigh the query at least roughly in the scales of your own self-knowledge. Never fail, for example, to follow out, to the extent of your actually aroused interest, the side question of an action's effect upon other characters of the tale or upon the tale itself. And if it is a scenario of *ideas* that you are producing, instead of a fiction scenario, or

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

if it is a story of mechanical or chemical relationships that you are reading, instead of a story of human relationships, never fail to follow up, *at least to the momentary sating of your aroused interest*, any side issue of causal relationship or of logical sequence that similarly forces itself upon your previously otherwise-engaged attention.

But understand that this advice is not for a moment intended to be taken as an urging to "make yourself do something" because you feel it to be "self-educative" or in any other sense "good discipline." It is, on the contrary, to be understood as an urging to *let* yourself do something that you have a natural prompting to do, but which other promptings, more habitually indulged, and thus grown into tyrannical spoiled-child promptings, are trying to keep you from doing.

In other words, it is not for a moment a priggish, pedantic, bluestocking, high-brow attitude toward a natural and enjoyable occupation that is demanded of us. We are not asked to keep poking ourselves to see if we are alive; or to keep self-consciously taking our mental temperatures to see if we are

## HOW TO READ

functioning normally. The fact is just the opposite of this. For right reading, in the direction established in the last chapter, is the normal result of *an intelligent following of our natural promptings*; and wrong reading — that is to say, reading into some circle of stagnation — is always the result of their willful or slack-minded suppression.

Of course, however, it goes without saying that, as one cannot control a spoiled child without effort, so one cannot control a clamorous, over-indulged, hurry-along-with-the-main-story curiosity without some exercise of will power. And unless this spoiled-child curiosity is controlled and made to behave, it is impossible for us to give play even to the most immediately alluring and ultimately valuable of our subsidiary curiosities. This much of willing effort we must make, then; this much of “self-discipline” we must practice, and must persevere in in spite of initial failures and forgettings, before we can learn to apply this most obvious and natural rule for getting started on the new road.

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

### XXI

And here, for the moment, we might leave the matter. For once a reader has learned something of the quickly accumulating reading capital that piles up in him through a following of these basic rules, and begins to discover the enhancement of his own enjoyment in reading (whatever the character of that enjoyment may be) that flows from that capital's automatic reinvestment, he will inevitably begin to develop his personal adaptations to the new method. And as soon as we reach this border-land of personal adaptation, we approach that country of individual likes and dislikes, of personal reachings-out and drawings-back, of temperamental tendencies, and intellectual affinities of affiliation, that can never (unless it be by some "psychoanalyst" dependent on our aid) be mapped out for us in advance by others.

But there is one helpful suggestion that may be made before we go on to the consideration of other aspects of our inquiry.

It is quite evident that in reading any article or essay or book that contains a developed

## HOW TO READ

theme,— fictional, argumentative, demonstrational, or what-not,— the intelligent reader, no matter what his personal idiosyncracies of method may be, must maintain some sort of just balance between the mass of subsidiary interests we have been discussing, and the main interest of the theme itself. And, since, the more cross-referenced ideas of relationship a reader possesses, the more numerous will be his incidental promptings toward the indulging of subsidiary curiosities, it follows that he must, more and more as he goes on, pick and choose between these promptings.

And we happen to be so built that our *un-directed* choice is almost certain to fall upon those curiosities that have to do with our reactions of *liking*; while we are apt to set aside and suppress those curiosities (as to derivations and results, as to “why’s” and “what-then’s”) that have to do with reactions of *disliking*.

The suggestion that I have to make, then, is that you little by little form the deliberate habit of *directing* your choice toward the indulging of any curiosities as to the nature and

## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

meanings of instinctive *dislikes* that you may be lucky enough to have.

And the reason for this is very simple.

We have already seen that, sooner or later, any road of reading that we may elect to follow will be blocked for us by unrealized relationships if we have not dealt recognizingly and inquiringly with earlier and underlying relationships as these presented themselves. And it so happens that the hidden relationships involved in our reactions of *liking* will, comparatively speaking and in the long run, take care of themselves. For when we experience a reaction of liking, we welcome it. And when we reëxperience it we re-welcome it; and even savor the recognition and, as it were, roll it for an instant under the tongue of our intelligence. So that little by little we tend, without any other effort on our parts and by the unconscious chemic of our minds, to resolve it into its component elements.

But with a reaction of dislike it is very different. The first few times that we experience it we may have a prompting of curiosity as to its nature and as to the relationships involved in our recoil from it. But if we continue to

## HOW TO READ

ignore these, we soon form the habit of *dodging the reaction*. Instead of savoring it and rolling it under our tongue, we spit it out at the first taste. And in the end (since *some* kind of a "reason why" our minds must have to be happy) we are as like as not to substitute a prejudice for an understanding, and to accept some cant phrase of our own or of some one else's in lieu of an explanation, and thus to establish once for all an "unrealized relationship" that may block some future road for us with stagnating results.

### XXII

We constantly and as a matter of common caution establish for ourselves in our everyday living such arbitrary reminders as this, of things that we know it would be well for us to do, but which we are prone to neglect.

The "shifting focus of our attention," even in such matters as going down town and coming back again, cannot safely be left to work out its own salvation. It is because of this — because each one of the two hundred hurrying humans who are crowding into a subway express is consciously *hurrying*, or consciously



## WITHOUT AND WITHIN

*keeping himself from being crushed, or consciously thinking out some left-over business problem, or consciously forecasting some evening pleasure, instead of consciously putting one foot in front of the other* — that we keep a guard on the subway platform to call out to them, “WATCH your step!” — “watch YOUR step!” — “WATCH — STEP!” And a device that we thus employ in the machinery of our daily lives may well be adapted for use in the machinery of our daily reading.

Suppose, then, that as a beginning you accustom yourself to regard any prompting of natural curiosity or interest you may have in regard to any feeling of distaste or disliking, as an official cry of “Watch your step!” Later on, you will find it easy and expedient to arrange other signals of predetermined significance and watch-dogs of helpful reminder to suit the individual adaptations that you will develop.

And now, having repeatedly referred to the existence of something that we have called our “intellectual digestion,” let us take a closer look at this function of our mind and examine its relation to our reading.

## CHAPTER VII

### INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

#### I

SOME wise wag, hiding a parable in a parody, has said that "to eat is human; to digest, divine." And when we come to think about it, we realize that it is exactly here — at the point indicated by the semicolon in this wag's sentence — that we are accustomed (as though at some boundary posting-station where burdens are shifted to other horses and entrusted to new guides) to hand over our responsibilities, quite casually and confidently, to the Unknown Mystery. Three times a day, as self-willed and selective human choosers, we "start something." And three times a day, unless something goes wrong with the mysterious machinery, we experience, with supreme content but with no other concern, the resultant miracle of transubstantiation.

And it is just the same with our minds.

No matter how proud of — I had almost said how "stuck on" — our *thinking*, and our

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

*reasoning powers*, and our *deductive faculties* we may be, it requires very little self-knowledge to realize that these more or less conscious and mechanical forms of mental exercise are but the *chewing of our mental food*.

The ultimate miracle of transubstantiation — the involuntary processes of disintegration and transforming, of selection and rejection, of absorption and assimilation, by which the essentials of ideas and the outcomes of understandings are finally incorporated in our personalities — all this takes place on the further side of another (or is it the same?) semicolon. No less in our reading than in our eating, there is a point at which, quite casually and confidently, we entrust all further responsibility to the Unknown Mystery within us. In short, if you happen to prefer the statement, there is a chemistry of the brain as well as of the body, whose fundamental mystery eludes us, but whose workings we may none the less study, and in the attainments of whose ends it is thus possible for us to coöperate.

And it is the purpose of this chapter (I) to examine, in the light of our everyday experience, the more obvious workings of this men-

## HOW TO READ

tal chemistry; (2) to point out a misconception that we constantly labor under in our reading for want of this simple facing of fact; and (3) to indicate the practical relevancy of these matters to the further developing of the reading-methods we are discussing.

### II

Before, however, we go into the laboratory and prepare the simple experiment needed to demonstrate the actual character of the reactions we are wanting to understand, it will be just as well to note a few general facts with regard to our habitual actions and attitude in the matter under discussion. For we are constantly *taking the real state of things into account*, while failing specifically to recognize their character.

Thus we frequently say to each other, "Yes, I'm inclined to agree with you. But suppose we sleep on it." We even have a proverb that says, "The night brings counsel." And nothing is more common than for a person who has masticated an idea for an hour and then, so to say, swallowed it and forgotten it, to be reminded of it the next day, or the next week,

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

and, finding its appearance subtly altered and his attitude correspondingly changed toward it, to say, "No, *I've been thinking that over*, and I've changed my mind."

Of course the psychologists hasten to supply us with highly interesting and, incidentally, conflicting theories about involuntary cerebration and the continuous activity of the subliminal consciousness. But for our present purpose it does n't make a bit of difference what you call it. The fact remains that, intellectually speaking, we are ruminating animals. The man just quoted had not, in any ordinary sense, been "thinking it over." He had, quite involuntarily and without any control either of the process or the result, been *digesting* the idea. His subsequent, conscious consideration of the result was to all intents and purposes a "chewing of his cud."

### III

Our first concern, then, is to see whether we cannot manage to surprise our minds in the actual act, while reading, of carrying out some of the coarser and less intricate transformations of its chemic action — just as, with a

## HOW TO READ

couple of glass tubes and a bunsen burner, a chemist will enable us to see Nature at her more obvious tricks of prestidigitation.

And by way of preparing the laboratory for our experiment, I am going to ask you to remember, all over again, that the printed matter before your eyes — whether it be on a signboard, or on the front sheet of the morning paper, or on a page of an exciting novel, or in the paragraph that you are now reading — is never a thing in itself, but is always merely *printed instructions, like sheet music*.

Somehow or other we do not seem to get mixed up about the nature of sheet music.

Even musicians, who “read music” as fluently as you and I read print, do not seem, often, to get mixed up about it.

Practically every one recognizes sheet music for what it actually is; namely, printed instructions as to what to do with a tin whistle, or a flute, or a violin and a piano, or a quartette of stringed instruments, or a full orchestra with its choirs of strings and brasses and woodwinds and instruments of percussion, *in order to make music*.

But, somehow, it is different with reading

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

matter. About the nature and the purpose of that we are constantly getting mixed.

Suppose, then, that we begin by putting down the facts.

(1) Reading matter, like sheet music, is just printed instructions.

(2) It may be merely instructions as to what to do with a set of muscles and with a pair of eyes and a pair of ears; as in the railway-crossing sign, STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!

Or (3) it may be trite instructions (like a tin-whistle tune) for stringing a few threadbare memories together so as to form a mental image of a "statement of fact"; as (I quote from this morning's paper) "The bride was gowned in white satin and wore a tulle veil caught back with orange blossoms."

Or (4) it may (as in H. G. Wells's novel, "The Research Magnificent") be instructions as to what to do with the full orchestra of one's personal attainment, with all its balanced choirs of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual experience and responsiveness, in order to make, inside one's self, a symphonic, soul-stirring vision of the finenesses of human failure.

## HOW TO READ

But we are constantly forgetting this.

We are constantly settling down into the lazy assumption that the text of a story is the story itself; that the words of a poem are the poetry itself; and forgetting that they are only instructions as to what to do with our memories and our imaginations, our reason and our understanding, in order to create inside ourselves the story or the poem.

And the fact of which, at the present moment, we need to remind ourselves is that, given a page or a volume of these instructions, the rest is "up to us"; just exactly as in the case of a musician with an instrument in his hand, or of a conductor with an orchestra under his baton, when one or other of them opens a volume of sheet music.

### IV

We all recognize that the sheet-music method of conveying instructions is a makeshift.

Even the layman knows it for a system of signs, effective on the whole, but nevertheless clumsy. Even the outsider understands that this system of signs is amazingly definite as to



## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

main issues, but is often hazy and sometimes wholly inarticulate as to subtleties — that it leaves (not from choice, but from necessity) many niceties of interpretation to the intelligence and the personal decision of the performer.

But we fail as a rule to see that the same thing, only more so, is true of our word-system of conveying instructions. Composers and performers alike, we are in the habit of assuming that our word-system, and especially our printed-word-system, not only equals the other in the definiteness of its main instructions, but is capable of being made almost free from minor haziness.

Yet the facts are quite the other way about.

The instructions of reading matter have, when carefully examined, scarcely any *absolute* definiteness to them at all.

They leave (and again not from choice but from necessity) not merely the niceties of interpretation, but the first-hand material of the composition itself, to the more or less involuntary selection of the performer.

Of course as an idea — as an intellectual realization — this fact has now become fa-

## HOW TO READ

miliar to us. We have repeatedly proved it to our own satisfaction and to our consequent acceptation in the earlier stages of our inquiry. But our present experiment requires something more than this theoretical conviction. And I am therefore going to contrive that you shall, in imagination at least, see the thing in operation with your own eyes.

### v

The box adjoining that of the party I was with at a recent Kneisel concert was occupied by two well-known musicians. And I noticed with some curiosity that during the performance of a Haydn quartette these two were sitting well forward in their seats, with a copy of the score held open on their knees, and were watching with the most intent interest the way in which the experts on the stage were following the instructions of the composer. Of course if the piece being played had been a new one, if, say, it had been one of Schoenberg's intricate and radical challenges of harmonic convention, this study of the score on the part of these specialists would not have attracted my attention. But the selection

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

being rendered was one of the loveliest of Haydn's well-known works, and the men I was watching must have been familiar with it for years. And they were not only listening with all their ears to the music, but were following the printed instructions closely and exchanging from time to time quick glances of silent comment and appreciation.

Now it is quite evident that they were not watching to see *whether the performers struck the right notes*. The definiteness of the instructions on the one hand, and the well-known skill of the performers on the other, made that a foregone conclusion. It was, as we can see, the subtleties of this famous quartette's individual interpretation that they were studying.

But suppose that two of you were similarly to sit, with the pages of Kipling's "The Brushwood Boy" open between you; and suppose that it were possible — by some miracle of mind-reading — for you similarly to watch (and to exchange glances about) *the way in which I followed the author's instructions as I read that story to myself*.

Do you not see that here would be far

## HOW TO READ

deeper differences than any of attack and of accent, of execution and inflection, of tempo and of temperament? Do you not see that, so far from my "striking the right notes" being a matter to be taken for granted, the very materials I worked with would be either foreign to you or non-existent? That the memories I assembled into scenes, and the features I built faces out of, would be unknown to you; and that the combinations I made of them would seem incongruous and inappropriate, since you would lack the associations that I unconsciously chose them for?

Do you not see that *my* landscape of Kipling's "Dream Country" would be alien to you, and that *my* cast of his chief characters — the potential *myselfes* with which I peopled that mystic land — would be unrecognizable? Nay, more: do you not see that to no single important word in the entire text would I give your personal meaning; and that the words that *were* important to me — the words whose grouped meanings every now and then combined to "make things happen in me" — would often be *words that you scarcely noticed?*

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

### VI

Of course you see all this. But then all this is merely an imaginative dramatization of what we have already discovered and discussed. And I have contrived this dramatized presentation of the actual workings of a reader's mind, not primarily for its own sake, but as a demonstrator in chemistry will dispose the paraphernalia and contrive the operative conditions of an experiment in order that, when the preliminary steps have been taken, the ingredients mixed, the lamp lighted, and the reaction intended to be observed is about to take place, he may invite the onlookers to approach the table and keep a closer watch. And it is this final and closer look that I now ask you to take at my supposed reading of "The Brushwood Boy."

Do you not see that when my readings of certain groups of words "made things happen in me," these happenings would at times consist of the minglings (like those of raindrops on a window pane) of bits of *old feeling* into spurts of *new emotion*? And do you not see that at other times these "happenings" would

## HOW TO READ

be subtler still; would consist of almost *chemical* combinings of separate atoms of familiar understanding into the beginnings of new perceptions? And do you not, finally, see that these occurrences would be *utterly personal to me*, and that, since they would quite literally result in *new growths of my personality*, they would also be of supreme importance to me?

### VII

But our object in examining a bit into the workings of these subtleties is by no means a desire to supervise or control their operation. The mere attempt to do this would instantly defeat its own end by stopping the machinery. Our object is to enable us, by understanding the *sources* of our reactions to reading, to acquire little by little a better criterion of values as to their output and to help us in gradually building up that *attitude toward all reading* that is to be the final object of our search.

In the last chapter we examined the more or less concrete, conscious, and voluntary seekings-out of relationships from which the rewards of reading (be these restful diversion, pleasurable stimulation, or utilitarian "knowl-

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

edge") are most immediately derived. And here we have managed for a moment to glimpse something of the manifold, minute, unconscious, and involuntary play of similar *relationship-establishing* that goes on, in the very act of reading, beneath the level of our ordinary attention and notice. And having once recognized the existence and glimpsed the nature of this unconscious mental activity, we can understand how, on the one hand, these quick-forming nuclei of emotion and perception rise, now and then, into conscious recognition (like the tips of coral reefs above the sea surface); and how, on the other hand, it must be through some slow, chemic-like continuance of the same activities that our "second thoughts," our "having-slept-on-it" judgments, and all the constructive results of our unconscious "digestion" of ideas and proposals are derived.

But our still more immediate object in examining into our subconscious reactions to reading is the recognizing and getting rid of a misconception that we are all prone to entertain; namely, the notion that it is the amount that we read, and more especially yet *the sum*

## HOW TO READ

*of what we remember* out of what we read, that really matters.

It is n't.

What really counts is the sum of what happens in us through reading — the ultimate outcome of those “concrete” combinings and “chemical” transformations by which new tissues are added to our intelligence and new cells to our understanding. What counts is not the quantity of our intellectual food, but the products of our intellectual digestion.

### VIII

I know a man — he is a contemporary and was once a classmate of my own — who has pushed this misconception to greater lengths than any one I know. Indeed, his mind is less like a digestive apparatus and more like a cold-storage warehouse than anything human I have ever encountered. For some decades now his mental floor-space has been practically filled, so that he no longer adds anything bulky to his stores. But little that has gone into his warehouse has been lost; and nothing that has stayed in it has ever spoiled.

I have watched him for years — watched



## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

him with curiosity and amazement— watched him take out from those icily preservative depths and lay down, as it were on the counter of his conversation, supposedly perishable intellectual provender:— the plots of long-forgotten novels, the middle names of now deceased acquaintances, the outlines of old after-dinner arguments, the carcasses of extinct theories, bunches of biographical dates, crates of infertile facts, historical happenings, chemical formulæ, literary quotations, — an endless variety, in short, of mental food that should have been consumed and digested years ago when it was fresh and in season, but which he has preserved, staling but intact, for a generation.

Yet while some of these articles come out a trifle shriveled, — a little sicklied o'er with the cold-storage hue, — no one of them ever shows the slightest sign of having been attacked by the digestive juices of my friend's mentality. And never — certainly never in the last twenty years or so — have I seen any reason to suspect that, by the normal processes of intellectual digestion and assimilation, he has added a single cell to his respon-

## HOW TO READ

siveness to life or revived by a single red corpuscle the circulation of his outlook on the world.

And yet, in certain lines, and in the ordinary acceptance of the term, he is "a great reader."

He is also, for our present purpose, a most useful specimen of a horrible example. For nothing ever happens in him when he reads. Nothing, that is, except the occasional storing away, in some still vacant cranny in his refrigerated memory, of one more frozen fact or dead idea.

### IX

You will not — or I trust that you will not — imagine for a moment that I am impugning the value of a good memory. I am merely calling attention to the fact that the storing of one's memory through reading is (or should be) a means to an end and not an end in itself. It is like the outfitting and provisioning of the ship of our adventure. Everything that goes into it that we can use later on is of value. Anything that, in the final test, we neither put to practical living use, or take out, like tinned food, and intellectually digest and live by, is a

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

waste of storage-room and a dead burden of superfluous cargo.

The man we are talking about has a most remarkable memory. He has (to change the simile) coddled it and pampered it and "sacrificed himself" in order to "give it every advantage," exactly like a doting mother with an only child. And the result is very similar. This "only child" of his always wants, when there is company, to monopolize the talk. It is as bad as a pet parrot. It fills in every pause with statements of irrelevant fact or offerings of superfluous information. Yet even so, we must not do my friend an injustice. His memory has a value both to himself and to those who know him. To himself I imagine it is like a miser's strong box. When he is not engaged in adding to its contents, he takes out its unproductive treasures and hugs himself in the joy of counting them. And to his acquaintances his memory is like a special supplement to the encyclopædia. One can often turn to it for information that one does not bother to carry round.

## HOW TO READ

### X

There is, by the way, a question that it has been his habit to ask me, once a year or so, for a long time. He asks it unexpectedly — apparently when he thinks me off my guard or in an “easy” mood, and thus liable to be surprised into divulging a professional secret.

“John,” he asks me, “how do you ever manage to remember all you read?”

Now it is, of course, useless to attempt a direct answer to such a question from such a man. You might explain to him for an hour; but instead of trying to understand what you meant, he would be trying to remember what you said. So I take refuge in the Socratic method. I ask him a question myself.

“George,” I say, “you eat three meals a day all the year round. How do you manage to hold all you eat?”

But he fails to get it.

I can see by the expression of his eyes — those windows to his warehouse — that he simply thinks that I have once more proved too alert to be caught napping and have once more guarded the secret that he so wants me

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

to share with him. For he has noticed that I have "ideas" in stock that he has, somehow, failed to pick up. And he naturally assumes that, since I have them, I must somewhere have read them and remembered them. How else, on the cold-storage basis of accumulating mental capital, can they have gotten into my refrigerator? What he is really asking for is my ammonia formula for preserving an even mental temperature of 36° Fahrenheit. And some day, on his tombstone, we shall find engraved, "Lord, keep my memory cold."

### XI

Let us each, at this point, do what George apparently never does, and ask *ourselves* a question. And let us each, before we go on with our discussion, try just for a second or two to find an honest answer. Here is the question:—

*"What did I have for dinner on the tenth of last April?"*

Doubtless we have all forgotten.

Yet the mere effort to remember has set blood to flooding the arterial filaments in our brains. And it is quite likely that in this very

## HOW TO READ

blood (which has just failed to stir into action the memory cells charged with the details of that menu) there has flowed some transmuted essence of that unremembered meal.

And it is no otherwise with reading.

Two months from now you may remember, or you may have forgotten, the verbal expositions of this chapter. But, assimilated and built into the living tissues of your intelligence, transubstantiated and incorporated in the very thoughts you will be thinking with, there will be (if any thing at all "happens in you" as you read it, and if anything digestively happens in you afterward) the essence of what you have extracted from this intellectual meal.

### XII

And now we come to the practical point, — the point that may, as yet, seem very blind and unlikely to be practical, — namely, the relevancy of all this to our actual reading.

For our memories, as we know, are apparently arbitrary, self-willed, and inconsistent. They are given to retaining, unasked, a host of things that we think we have no interest in or use for; while mislaying, or losing, things

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

that we have begged them in vain to keep for us. Indeed, the best of them sometimes act like pockets with holes in them — letting five-dollar pocket-knives drop out, but retaining the crumpled seat-coupons of a vaudeville show. Yet in spite of this I would seem to be urging you to give over the training of your memories and to be counseling, instead, the centering of your attention upon minute matters of mental activity which, in the long run, take care of themselves.

But this is very far, indeed, from being the case.

Let us examine for a moment the real workings of our memories.

### XIII

Modern science is inclined to believe that those brain cells with which the function of memory is connected retain a record of every incident of our lives; that, physiologically speaking, *we never forget anything*, no matter how often, mentally speaking, we *fail to remember*: in short that "remembering" is merely the successful sending-through, to the latent cells where the records are stored, of the

## HOW TO READ

stimulating impulses needed to arouse them. Thus our memories are like some micro-cosmic telephone system in which, the oftener we make a call, the more used do the operators become in "getting the connection" for us. And the specialists assure us, moreover, that these paths of connection—the routings through local exchanges by which our calls are sent—are *association* paths; which (translated into the terms of our present inquiry) means paths of *somehow recognized relationships*.

Of course these "recognized relationships" may be either warranted in fact or altogether arbitrary. And the quack mind-doctors, who undertake to train our memories by correspondence, are very fond of prescribing these arbitrarily established relationships as aids to memorizing. Thus, they will advise you, if you happen to be a follower of Izaak Walton and to have a second cousin living in a town on the Hudson that you can never recall the name of, to fix the town in your memory by the fact that your second cousin's wife's sister has a "fishy" eye and that *Fishkill* ought to be a good place to catch trout. However, we have progressed far enough in our study of the



## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

value to us in our reading of the other kind of recognized relationships, to dismiss these pompous winnowers of mental chaff with a good-natured laugh.

Nor, for our immediate purpose, is it necessary for us to go any deeper into the fascinating but complex subject of memory. We need, now, only to remind ourselves of a fact of which our experience furnishes us constant proof.

### XIV

We know, for instance, that if we happen to meet an acquaintance on the street and to stop for a moment's inconsequential chat with him, the chances are that in a week we shall have forgotten all that was said; and that in six months the incident itself may easily have slipped our minds. But suppose that the next morning another acquaintance stops us and says, "Tough about Judson's shooting himself!" — Judson being the man we'd talked to the day before. That puts a new face on the matter; and we will then remember for good and all that Judson, a few hours before he pulled the trigger, said to us

## HOW TO READ

with a queer sort of casualness that this was "a bum world anyway" and that "we would probably be quite as well out of it as in it."

Yes, this is another "extreme case." But I have chosen it that way on purpose; just as one makes a photographic enlargement of a bit of handwriting in order to examine it. Its extremeness enables us to see instantly that we should remember the character of our talk with Judson because *our attention was re-directed to it promptly* and because we then *discovered a recognized relationship in it*.

And, having seen this, we can also see that if the complete records were open to us, we should no doubt find that these two factors had, in some fortuitous and forgotten way, been actively responsible for even those remembering, so often apparently haphazard and senseless, that persist in us from the days of childhood.

### XV

And so, by another and more roundabout route, but in possession now of still other understandings and of newly acquired senses of relationship, we come back to the further con-

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

sideration of those practical reasons, dealt with in the last chapter, for valuing and indulging (by slight exercises of deliberate will power when necessary) the lesser impulses of curiosity and the minor upwellings of interest that come to us *during reading* and *after reading*.

Let us sum up our discoveries: —

(1) We know now what these lesser curiosities and these passing impulses of interest that intrude for a moment on our engrossment in “the story” really are. They are the constructive and digestive activities of our unconscious minds rising into consciousness. *They are the top layer of what is happening in us as we read.*

(2) We know, too, that if we habitually and impatiently brush these incidents aside and hurry on, the chances of our “forgetting” them gradually increase toward certainty. Whereas even a moment’s turning of attention to them, and a passing noting of their relationship to our present enjoyment, or to our past prejudices, or to our other reactions to what we are reading, tends to *give them a number in our mental ’phone book.*

## HOW TO READ

(3) We know now, moreover, that "what happens in us" through reading *does n't all happen while we read*. It only *begins* to happen then. Our intellectual digestion goes on working on a book for days and weeks; and periodically, during this process, we experience other impulses of curiosity toward it and other upwellings of interest with regard to it — urgings, no less, from that "ruminating animal," our intelligence, to help along in the process of assimilation by chewing the cud of its progressive reflections for it.

(4) And we know now, too, that as far as "remembering what we read" goes, since memory is a matter of *retracing paths of established relationship*, our memories will, in the long run, take care of themselves if we take care of establishing the relationships.

(5) And so we arrive at our practical realization of the relevancy of these minute matters to our reading.

For even when reading is for us only a careless pleasing of our mental palates, the fugitive pleasure we derive from it is due to the unrecognized and quickly forgotten play of the coarser of these reactions.

## INTELLECTUAL DIGESTION

And it is only by the selective indulgence of our natural impulses toward noting the finer of these spontaneous reactions, and through gradually, by noting them, establishing familiar paths of relationship among them, that all the progressive pleasures, the increasing stimulation, the accumulating capital, and the final enhancements and enfranchisements of right reading are to be sought and, in our respectively possible degrees, attained.

### XVI

In addition, therefore, to the advisory rules laid down in the last chapter for those wishing, for whatsoever purpose, to increase their reading efficiency, we now need to emphasize the need of *applying these same rules during the subsequent period of intellectual digestion.*

Do not make the "thinking over" of a book a matter of "duty." Do not keep "taking your mental temperature" about it or "poking yourself to see if you are alive" with regard to it.

But, on the other hand, *learn to value your curiosity* about books *after* reading them. Learn to *evaluate your minor curiosities* in re-

## HOW TO READ

gard to them *after* you have read them. Never fail to follow out, *to the extent of your aroused interest*, any subsequent promptings of inquiry into their meaning for you, or into your feelings toward them. And, other things being equal, force yourself to give the right of way to curiosities as to your antagonisms and your dislikes, rather than to curiosities as to your acquiescences and your likings.

And now, by way of taking up some of the larger questions of relationship-seeking involved in reading *whole books*, — questions that have purposely been deferred till we had laid a foundation for their consideration, — let us take up the matter of how to read a novel.

## CHAPTER VIII

### HOW TO READ A NOVEL

#### I

THUS far we have dealt almost exclusively with the subjective side of reading: with the internal mechanisms of the process; with the character of the raw materials in which we work; with the sources from which we draw these materials; with the urges, largely unconscious, that we obey in building up, out of these materials, our versions of the author's work; with the limitations imposed upon us, and the general character and trend of the opportunities opened out to us by the fact of our having to read under these generally unrealized and disregarded conditions.

And we have perhaps seemed, in consequence, to be assuming that authors have no rights that a reader is bound to respect, and that the normally accepted and generally read-for objectivity of a book's contents is either non-existent or of negligible value.

But there has been a definite purpose in

## HOW TO READ

this order of procedure. For whereas there are two distinct factors in right reading, and whereas we ordinarily overestimate the importance of one of these factors while ignoring the very existence of the other, it has been necessary to restore the balance by a compensating overemphasis. And we have attempted to do this while at the same time acquiring a first-hand and vivid realization of the living actuality and the finally governing character of the habitually ignored subjective factor. Moreover, this is the logical approach to a systemized understanding of right reading. For, while individual readers do constantly arrive at an intelligent and expert practice of right reading through the instinctive, unconscious, and unanalyzed adapting of these subjective means to the complex ends involved, the methods of these individual arrivals are unsystemized and incommunicable. And not alone the best routes of approach to right reading, but the true nature of its rewards and the real goals toward which it leads, cannot be made systematically clear to the inquiring, would-be practitioner of the art while he or she continues to regard the author's concep-



## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

tion as a concrete thing actually imprisoned in the text and identically derivable therefrom by each of us.

### II

The conception of the author is, of course, forever un-get-at-able except in approximation by any of us. It is not and cannot be "imprisoned in the text." It exists, and can exist, nowhere in the world except in the author's consciousness. And yet this conception of the author is for us, as a matter of fact, more nearly an objectively sharable entity than our inquiries into our subjective reading processes have thus far led us to see.

For in spite of the variousness (when closely examined) of our personal experiences, temperamental biases, intellectual predispositions, and complex character make-ups, our *type resemblances* in these matters are (when viewed from a little distance) more noticeable than our individual differences. So that while no two of us ever make for ourselves identical formulations of an author's conception, our individual formulations fall inevitably into type classifications — into groups within

## HOW TO READ

which the general agreements outweigh the specific differences. And as even these type differences, and even racial distinctions and historical alterations of outlook, merge at last into the basic solidarity of our shared humanity, it follows that in something very like a direct proportion to the universal human relevancy of an author's conception our readings of his work tend to a consensus of practical agreement. They will, let us say, group themselves into a central core of similar formulations, surrounded by smaller groups of aberrant type readings, and fringe out into individual freak interpretations.

Let me illustrate this statement by an example.

In the last chapter we used a fancied reading of "The Brushwood Boy" as a means of examining the extreme individuality of our personal reading processes. Yet thousands upon thousands of English-speaking readers, in spite of their thousands of individual readings of the tale, have found themselves in essential agreement in their formulation of Kipling's elusive conception of youth's universal longing. And at the same time other, although fewer, thou-

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

sands have found themselves in equally essential agreement over their various impatient inabilities to "see anything in it." And a woman once actually and seriously declared to me that she thought "The Brushwood Boy" the "most indecent story she had ever read."

### III

We have now arrived, then, at a point where we can agree to define right reading as a constructive and critical attempt to formulate, each one for himself, *the thing that the author is trying to show us* in the terms of those *subjective processes and materials* that we have discussed in the preceding chapters. And it remains for us to discuss the broader practical problems involved in our "adventure of learning to read" when right reading is thus regarded.

And I have elected to discuss these broader problems under the chapter heading of "How to Read a Novel," because, while every kind of right reading is demanded of us in specialized and concentratedly developed form in some other-than-fiction kind of reading, it is

## HOW TO READ

in fiction especially (and more and more so as the modern novel continues to claim the whole of life as its field and to include all of life's attainments and relationships in its successive and many-angled "criticisms of life") that all kinds of right reading are demanded of us in turn and in constructive and critical combination. And, moreover, because it is especially in reading fiction that we are given to muddling along without any active exercise of right reading at all and without, therefore, deriving any of the enhancements that should result to us.

### IV

Let us begin with the statement that the right reading of a novel consists in a constructive and critical formulation for ourselves, in the fullest possible terms of our own experience, of the particular fictional conception that the author is trying to place before us. And in order to get the problems involved in this task intelligently stated, let us examine our relations to fiction and to fictional conceptions.

Children and young people, as we have already seen, love fiction because it gives form to

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

their unformulated experience; because it supplies an imaginative concreteness to their longing for adventure; because it makes articulate their unvoiced dreams of personal achievement. They instinctively use it, in other words, even when taking refuge in it from their immediate griefs and boredom, as an approach to wider living. And we, if we would have it continue to serve us, even as a refuge, must do the same.

But we are no longer children. We are no longer, on the stream of youth's development, being carried swiftly forward in a constantly altering approach to life and having our dreams automatically changed for us in consequence. We have, relatively speaking, arrived. Our development, to put it more accurately, has slowed down; so that our dreams, more and more, impinge upon reality; and experience, more and more, intervenes to contradict and correct our hopes. And our relation to fiction, even as a refuge, changes accordingly.

If, under these new conditions, we gradually come to shrink from experience; gradually accept life as a treadmill; gradually close our

## HOW TO READ

eyes to its tangled and contradictory implications and seek to take refuge from its new puzzles in the unaltered redreaming of old dreams; — we soon come to the using of fiction as a mere drug to deaden consciousness with. And as this is to drift, both in our living and our reading development, into the most vicious of all vicious circles of stagnation, we may, for our present purpose, dismiss such reading of fiction from our consideration.

But if, as we come in contact with the realities of living, we begin, in any measure whatever, to develop an interest in the meaning of life; if we experience the slightest promptings of a will to inquire; if, hesitatingly at first, but with growing curiosity and deepening interest, we begin to ask questions of experience; if, from thus asking questions of experience, we come little by little to the seeking of experience in order to question it, — then more and more consciously and purposefully we find ourselves turning to fiction and enjoying it because it synthesizes our own observations of life and extends and amplifies and interprets them.

Yet this is only one of its functions. For, since new attitudes toward experience are the

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

source of all new hopes and new dreams, it follows that the more we face life from this interested angle, and the more we practice the right reading of science and history and philosophy and fiction itself as aids to such facing, the more constantly can fiction reassume for us its legitimate function toward the "young" — the more often, that is to say, can it serve us afresh as the mould for new hopes, as the concrete expression of new dreams; in short, as the means of making tentative imaginary syntheses of the broader life we are thus approaching.

It was to these constantly readjusted and reorganized functions of fiction that we referred in the fifth chapter, in saying that "there are nursery rhymes for every mile of the way; love-stories for every stage of growth; adventure-tales for every enlargement of our consciousness and understanding."

### V

When looked at from this point of view, all reading matter becomes an invitation to us in some way to compare notes with another observer; either upon the actuality of the facts

## HOW TO READ

of existence, or upon the relations that these facts conceivably bear to one another and to ourselves. And the distinctive feature of fiction is that it invites us to undertake this comparing of notes by formulating for ourselves some particular, imaginative arrangement of the more or less characteristic and familiar facts of our common experience, *so contrived by the author as to form an artificial synthesis, or appearance of completeness, in the human drama that is being tumultuously enacted before our eyes and within ourselves.*

And the first thing that, as prospective acceptors of such fictional invitations, it is important for us to realize, is that the ultimate basis of every such artificial synthesis or appearance of completeness — and hence the fundamental factor of our personal formulation of it — is always a particular way of looking at things, a special attitude of mind, a *mood* of observation. This ultimate fictional basis is never, even in the shallowest and trashiest yellow-backed time-killer, the plot of the story. And it is never, even in the most stirring romance or in the most shuddersome tragedy, that less tangible but more living



## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

thing that we call "the story itself." It is always an angle of observance, a human mood. Thus the ultimate basis of all detective stories and mystery tales is the mood of momentarily looking at life as a challenge to our ingenuity. And the ultimate basis of all tales of adventurous action is the mood of looking at the world as an openable oyster. And the ultimate basis of all romance is the mood of imagining our dreams fulfilled. And the ultimate basis of all real tragedy is the mood of looking at the inevitable as the great consoler, the one final and sanctioned assumer of our responsibilities.

So that in electing to read a novel,—in accepting the invitation of a writer of fiction,—we have to become *the guests of the author's mood* before we can intelligently act as his collaborators. We should in no case forget our guestship until we have felt our way to at least a tentative recognition of the mood the author is asking us to share with him. And so the first thing that is demanded of us in beginning a novel is an attitude of active and open-minded inquiry with this fact in mind. If this attitude does not come easy to us, we

## HOW TO READ

should force ourselves to assume it until it does. And the first and most effective preliminary to the assuming of this attitude is the deliberate and intentional clearing from our minds of all preferences, preconceptions, expectations, and demands with regard to what it is that the author is going to ask of us and show us; at the same time holding ourselves ready, as soon as we have found the clue, to put our entire equipment unreservedly at his disposal for those purposes of "constructive and critical formulation" that we shall presently examine.

### VI

But before going on to examine these, it will be well to make absolutely certain that we understand, not only the need for this initial open-mindedness, but the importance of consciously recognizing and falling in with the author's mood at the earliest possible moment. For we do not, as a rule, realize how constantly, in every kind of trying to see what others are pointing out to us, we are hindered and handicapped and defeated by preconceptions.

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

For example, one of the surprises we encounter on our first sea voyage is the discovery of how difficult it is to see a whale.

It is, let us say, the third day out. Good weather has enabled us to acquire what we ignorantly imagine to be our "sea legs." We no longer speak of "going down stairs." And at seven bells we no longer do surreptitious arithmetic on our fingers and verify the result by covert glances at our watches. Indeed, we quite fancy ourselves old salts. And then, in passing our steamer chair, a ship's acquaintance asks us if we have seen the whale.

"Whale?" we exclaim eagerly. "No. Where is it?"

And he explains that it is a mile or so off the weather bow and offers to show it to us. But when we've rushed to the opposite rail and joined the knot of excited people gathered there, we can see nothing—nothing, that is, except water and waves and sun-glints and white caps. And our self-appointed cicerone points and says, "There! Did n't you see him then?" And we squint in the direction of his extended arm and say no, we did n't. And he

## HOW TO READ

becomes more and more explanatory, and we grow more and more obfuscated. Until, just as he is on the point of giving us up as hopeless, we happen quite by accident to notice an insignificant feather of white spray spurt up away off on the horizon, and to hear the girl next to us cry, "There he blows!"

And we say, "That! Is *that* a whale?"

And our friend says, "Why, of course. What did you think it was?"

And then (according as we happen to be constituted) we either go back to our steamer chair and our novel, saying "Pooh! A nice fuss over nothing!" or else, our curiosity having been aroused, we take the trouble to back-track our recent mental processes and so discover that as a matter of fact we had not once tried to see what our friend was pointing out to us, but had, instead, been looking demandingly for a large, square-headed, black fish with forked flukes and a miniature Old Faithful spouting intermittently from its head. In fine we discover that we had been unable to see the whale, not at all because we did not know what a whale looked like, but precisely because we thought we knew.

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

### VII

A few years ago Mr. Will Irwin published a little volume called "The Confessions of a Con Man." And I remember, at the time it appeared, calling the attention of a friend to it and being rather taken to task by him in consequence. "Did *you* enjoy *that*?" he asked me with fine scorn. And when I had owned up that I had, he said, "Why, good heavens, the man does n't give away a single confidence trick that has not been public property for years."

And this, as it happened, was perfectly true. But it was also, in view of the author's invitation and intention, perfectly immaterial. It was, indeed, the tacit condition upon which the "con man's" unintentional and far more interesting "confessions" had been obtained. For Mr. Irwin, having gained the partial confidence of a confidence man, had been wise enough not to make him restive or suspicious by trying to get out of him the latest secrets of his profession—those tricks, new to-day and old to-morrow, by whose newness he gained his living. He had been glad to accept, in lieu of "modern instances," the histories of deceptions

## HOW TO READ

now out-moded; because, in reminiscing about these, the man spoke openly and revealed himself without guile. Mr. Irwin had thus surprised a secret far more elusive and enduring than that of the "latest" confidence tricks. He had induced the man, without his knowing it, to "confess" his philosophy of life and to disclose the sanctions of his self-esteem. And in his book Mr. Irwin was offering us the interesting opportunity of looking, in imagination, through a grafter's eyes upon a grafter's world; of finding out, in imagination, what it might be like to be the proud possessor of sharp wits and to roam a happy hunting-ground where the only animals were the Gullibles and the Ungullibles.

But my friend, what with looking intently for a large, square-headed, black fish spouting geysers, had failed to see the whale.

He had, in fact, when he read the title of Mr. Irwin's book, made up his mind what he wanted Mr. Irwin to show him. He had kept on wanting this and looking for it to the end. And in condemning Mr. Irwin as a writer because Mr. Irwin had been trying to show him something else and he had refused to let him,

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

he had passed judgment on nothing but his own skill as a reader.

Of course he might not have cared to accept Mr. Irwin's real invitation. And he might quite properly have laid the book down as soon as he had discovered the actual character of its offering. But in omitting a preliminary, open-minded seeking-out of the author's attitude of observation, and then, on that basis, either looking at his whale or refusing to bother with it, he had failed in the first requirement of the intelligent reader.

### VIII

Five years ago John Galsworthy published his novel "The Patrician." And in the months that followed its appearance I met several confirmed admirers of Galsworthy's work who seemed disappointed in the new book. They were even inclined to be a bit grouchy over — well, that was exactly where the trouble came in — over, let us say, some indefinable injustice toward them, whether of omission or of commission they could not tell, of which they dimly felt Mr. Galsworthy to have been guilty. This fact interested me at

## HOW TO READ

the time and may well interest us now; for its explanation illuminates one of the pitfalls that our preconceptions are constantly digging for our appreciation.

To begin with, knowing the men, I am persuaded that "The Patrician," divested of Mr. Galsworthy's name as author, would at once have been recognized by them as the very beautiful piece of work and as the sound and subtle criticism of life that it is. But having, through a series of years and of novels, accustomed themselves to reading Galsworthy in the attitude of mind that he had theretofore maintained toward life in his work, they had insisted upon reading "The Patrician" in that mood and had ascribed their consequent puzzlement to the author.

Galsworthy, in his earlier novels, is succinctly describable as a man who saw with unusual clearness the hidden interdependences and masked reciprocal relations of human intercourse, and who presented these to us in terms of the ironies resulting from their non-recognition. While utterly free from any rancor against the individual exponents of the amiable and well-intentioned narrow-minded-



## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

ness that he had portrayed, he was never content until, by the exercise of just that sympathetic and tolerant understanding of them that he possessed, he had, as it were, given them enough rope to hang themselves by. Naturally enough, he had been called a cynic. And although behind the openly caustic irony of his novels there had ever lain the essentially cleansing humor and healing charity of his comprehension, yet having dubbed him "cynic" his readers had come to seek him out in the confident expectation of finding a sly dog.

And lo, the author of "The Patrician" was a poet!

The novel is a wonderful word-picture of a family of aristocrats with its three generations subtly differentiated by their successively lessening consciousness of caste; with its many members, clean-cut as cameos, seen from the authentic and indicative angles of their individual outlooks; with its patriarchs resigned or desperately at bay before the inroads of modernity, and its high-hearted and stern-minded youths equally yet variously fretting at the curb of caste-tradition. The

## HOW TO READ

story is wrought with infinite loving labor, in words weighed to the fraction of intrinsic appositeness and in phrases of exquisite imagery. Yet for all its beauty there is a sardonic note in its dénouement — the echo of a knell. For the work is not only a portrait, but a prophecy. It is a valedictory as well as an appreciation. It is the swan song of a type.

In writing it, Mr. Galsworthy asked his readers to assume in turn the outlooks of three generations and from these to construct with him a particular mood of observation toward the passing order of the English nobility. But these guests of his mood in "The Man of Property" and "The Country House" had accepted his new invitation in the spirit of the old and so missed its meaning.

### IX

Fortunately for the student of right reading, it is in the simpler forms of fiction — in love-stories proper, in mystery-mongering tales, in stories of action and adventure and the like — that the mood of the author, the angle of observation from which the novel is written, is most single-minded in itself; is

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

most quickly and openly and once-for-all revealed; and is thus most easily and certainly to be recognized and fallen in with. In many of these cases the first paragraph or the first page contains a full clue to it. In many such instances one senses the book's mood instinctively and adjusts one's self to it spontaneously and without ever consciously recognizing that it has one. But to allow one's self to do this is bad practice. For it is by the habit and consequent training of *consciously establishing this mood relation* with one's more naïve and obvious authors that one acquires most quickly the ability to collaborate intelligently with authors who are dealing with life in more sophisticated and more complex moods.

For one thing it is very easy to fall into the habit of expecting to have this simple mood-relationship instantly established for us by the author, and of then being "uninterested" if an author does so simple a thing as to begin by thoroughly outlining a situation before he develops his way of looking at what happens there. Yet this is constantly being done. It is, indeed, the rule rather than the exception for

## HOW TO READ

us to need to maintain our open-minded attitude toward the author's selected way of looking at things until we have actively co-operated with him in the formulation of his scenic setting and in the initial conception of his characters.

And perhaps the large majority of those readers who are naturally inclined toward right reading do *this much* automatically and without any actual recognition of what they are doing. But it is none the less bad practice on that account. For it is exactly by doing this consciously and watchfully that we can best develop that quick responsiveness to mood, that instant ability to recognize disclosed angles of observation, and that supple readiness to assume them as they are revealed, that is the first requisite for our intelligent reading of an author whose own fictional attitude is really that of observing the comedy aspects or the tragedy aspects of the conflicting attitudes of others. It is perhaps not too much to say that the failure to develop, in one way or another, this responsiveness and quickness in recognition and adaptation is what most frequently prevents our progress-

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

ing beyond the beginnings of fictional right reading. And it is certain that the higher we go in the scale of fiction, the more necessary does this development become for us. For modern fiction tends more and more toward being a dramatization of *outlook*, a demonstration of the varying possibilities of *points of view*. Not only are there countless novels written to-day that invite us, as novels have never invited us before, to look at life through the eyes of the "other half"; whose way of living as well as whose point of view has been ignored or despised by us; but much modern fiction of the first order is, in its final intention, a *mood-constructor*; that is to say, an invitation to us to formulate for ourselves, under the guidance of the author, and out of the gradually assembled implications of the development of his story, a final, tentative, *point of view of our own* — a "one way of looking at life," an achieved synthesis of estimating outlook.

Take, for example, Arnold Bennett's "The Old Wives' Tale." Here is a novel which follows, in the minutest and most "realistic" detail, the personal histories and interwoven at-

## HOW TO READ

titudes of two and a half generations of a middle-class English family. In a leisurely, apparently "plotless," and (by reason of its unemotional treatment of "events") superficially uneventful, manner, it carries us, from the youth of its two leading characters and from the middle age of their parents, to the ultimate deaths of every one closely connected with the story except a single and, by then, middle-aged and utterly worthless representative of the third generation — a survivor who by his mere surviving stands before us as the sole and completely negligible result, humanly speaking, of the whole intensely human and many-sidedly interesting struggle. Yet it achieves, for those of its readers who have read it with this open-minded and progressively constructive responsiveness, a complete, dramatic amalgamation of two points of view that had never before been successfully combined in fiction: — that of the supreme importance and significance of life to the individual; and that of the supreme insignificance and unimportance of the individual or of any line of individuals to the mysterious, long-sighted purposes of Life.

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

### X

Let us assume, now, that we have grasped the principle involved in this initial, active, and open-minded seeking-out of the attitude the author is asking us to share with him. And let us assume (deferring for the present our consideration of novels wherein the controlling mood of the author does not reveal itself either early or simply) that we have determined, in every obviously mooded novel that we read, definitely to identify the author's attitude at the earliest possible moment.

The important point that we next have to note in formulating rules for the right reading of novels, is this: That having recognized the mood of the author and having either spontaneously "fallen in with it" or placed ourselves in sympathetic readiness to do so, we must, from then on, view the entire world of the story — its unfolding situations, its developing characters, their deploying relations to each other, and all questions of the relations of ourselves or of the author to these — *from the point of view of this governing and basic attitude.*

## HOW TO READ

Do not misunderstand me. I do not for a moment mean that we should not, in the most ordinary and unself-conscious and zestful sense of the words, "read our book." I mean that we must deal with all upwelling inquiries as to probability, consistency, truth to type, and mutual attitude of characters, with each outcropping manifestation of personal like and dislike of actors or actions, with all disappointments of unconsciously aroused expectation, or impulses toward resentment based on conventional attitudes of mind,— in short, with any and all subsidiary curiosities and any and all promptings to pass judgment that arise in the course of "reading our book,"— with primary and specific relation to *this established angle of observation*.

Suppose that an author's story deals with a man torn between the conflicting urges of an adventurous *Wanderlust* and a persistent dream of a wife, children, and the coziness of the feathered nest.

The author's mood of observation may be that of the romantic portraying of sentiment triumphant over obstacles. Or it may be that of the romanic portrayal of the rolling stone's



## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

toying with successive mossbeds. Or it may be a mood of good-natured irony, smiling in sympathetic understanding of the irreconcilability of human desires. Or it may be that of looking with hilarious amusement at the spectacle of a human donkey, now running frantically toward this haystack and now toward that, and finally starving between them. It may be the mood of looking at this hero-of-divided-allegiance through the eyes of any one of a dozen types of human onlookers. Or it may be a mood of looking at the world and at life through the bi-focused eyes of the hero himself.

Any one of these attitudes will be humanly valid. The author's development of his story from the chosen point of view may be consistently true to mood and revealingly or amusingly interpretative of our own hearts and natures when so regarded. But in just so far as we allow the criteria of judgment that belong to another way of looking at things to color our reactions to the story as presented, in exactly so far shall we fail in our right reading of it, and shall we miss whatever dividends of enjoyment or of added responsiveness to

## HOW TO READ

life our proper collaboration with the author might have brought to us.

And of course, since this is manifestly true in the case of a simply conceived and singly minded story of idealized sentiment or smiling satire, it is progressively true, in a geometric ratio of importance, in novels where we are asked to look, first from one angle and then from another, at the same series of human actions; or to maintain the attitude of impersonal and inquiring observers toward a conflict of clashing moods and their resulting misunderstandings; or to build up a new mood of observation never before attained by us, by the constructive and dramatic juxtaposition of successive and interrelated and mood-derived realizations of relationship.

So that one of the most important habits that the reader can form — a habit that consciously or unconsciously he must acquire and develop if he is going to increase his ability to read better, and more revealing and more “up-channel” fiction — is this habit of differential criticism based on the criteria of outlook.

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

### XI

And this brings us finally face to face with those problems of the "constructive and critical" activity demanded of the right readers of a novel that we have repeatedly referred to.

The phrase has a somewhat portentous sound. It suggests responsibilities to be assumed; and we are prone to shirk the conscious assumption of responsibilities. It suggests *work*; and we are apt to look askance at the idea of work in connection with the reading of fiction, which is always undertaken and always should be undertaken in some degree in the spirit of "play" as we have already defined that impulse. But the truth is that we are invariably both constructive and critical in all our reading; and the only real problem before us is that of so directing these perfectly normal but often misapplied functionings of our minds that they may more and more correctly and coöperatively minister to our formulation for ourselves of the author's conception.

## HOW TO READ

### XII

We have already armed ourselves with a realization of the constructive methods we employ in reading, and of the more or less unconscious accompaniment of critical activity, corrective, recognitional, and comparative, that is automatically maintained at the backs of our minds as we read. And we have already agreed that it is important for us to identify and fall in with the main observational mood of the novel we are reading; to be ready to do the same with any subsidiary moods (as the points of view of individual characters) that are introduced as parts of its subject-matter; and that we must scrupulously view the entire world of the story, including its subsidiary ways of looking at things, from the selected angle of envisagement. But the very act of identifying this angle is a critical act. And every glance by which we assure ourselves that we are maintaining it, or discover that we are not, is an act of criticism. So that our problem is largely one of directive application.

Let us, however, begin by considering the simpler problems of construction.

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

And the first rule that we should keep in mind in the matter of "constructive" coöperation with the author, is that we should hold ourselves ready at any moment, and quite irrespective of our having or not having discovered the trend of his intention, to put our entire experiential equipment and the best efforts of our "mental movie" outfit and of our "idea distillery" at his disposal for the production of whatever scenes, character conceptions, or details of situational development he may ask to have produced. We may, or may not, see why he wants them. The inference is that they are going to be needed. Later on, if we discover that he is given to wasteful or unwarranted demands on us in this regard (as, for instance, if he proves to be a landscape-describing crank, or interpolates airings of his own views that are irrelevant and do not "pay their own way"), we may skim or skip judiciously. But "skimming" and "skipping," whether we realize it or not, is a critical act. It is either a conscious criticism of the author, or an unconscious criticism of ourselves. So it should be used with care and in full realization of its meaning. It is an

## HOW TO READ

excellent rule to read at least a hundred pages of any novel before refusing the fullest constructive coöperation in our power to any passage of it.

### XIII

But there is another kind of constructive activity and ability that is demanded of us in novel-reading besides this simple visualizing of scenes and of action, this preparatory recognition of ideas and attitudes, this primary conceiving of characters and motives. All these things are, so to say, the manufactured parts (manufactured by us at the author's order out of our own stock of experience) that we are gradually, under the author's direction, to assemble into the completed structure of his artificial synthesis — that is to say, into our formulation of his conception of it. And it is because we cannot tell, beforehand, what use is going to be made of these parts, or how important any least one of them may prove to be, that we should coöperate whole-heartedly in their construction as they are called for, and should then keep them open-mindedly at hand ready for whatever use the story re-

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

quires us to make of them. We are likely at any moment to be required to bring separate characters, ideas, impulses, and attitudes into imaginary contact and to construct the atmosphere and implications of their conjunction; and we should be as alertly and whole-heartedly coöperative in this secondary construction as in the first.

But whereas, thus far, we have been considering our constructive duties separately, we now arrive at a point where it is no longer possible to leave our critical activities out of account.

### XIV

The least critical reader of us all passes constant judgment as he reads (1) upon the author; (2) upon the characters of the story; and (3) upon himself.

(1) He yawns and says to himself that the author is a bore. Or he grins and owns that the author is a clever wag. Or he bristles up and says that the author must be an atheist or a libertine.

(2) He is very charitable to the characters who exhibit his own pet weaknesses. Or he is

## HOW TO READ

bitterly condemnatory of the character who yields to his own most dreaded vice. Or he approves the character who acts as he likes to think *he* acts, and condemns the character who acts, without justification, as he often acts himself, but with a perfectly good excuse.

(3) He says to himself that he "can't understand" how any one can do this or that. Or he tells himself that he "would have done the same thing" as some one in the story. Or he says that he "has no time" for hard-luck stories, or that this, that, or the other point of view "makes him tired."

But of course the reader who experiences these feelings or expresses them to himself as he reads, does not necessarily recognize them as criticisms; and is still less likely to recognize the self-criticism involved in the third division. But as soon as we see these feelings tabulated as above, we recognize the critical nature of them. And, moreover, a little examination suffices to show us that they are not, really, three kinds of criticism, but three different employments of a criticism that is always three-sided. For reading a novel is a triangular operation in which (1) the author,



## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

(2) the reader, and (3) their joint production are inseparably linked. There are two creators of every character, of every situation, of every outcome of the conjunction of characters and situations — the author and the reader. Both are responsible, not only for, but to, their joint production. Every criticism felt or expressed by the reader involves all three. And every judgment of the reader, to be a self-helpful and self-guiding judgment, must take into account the relations of the thing judged to the other two.

### XV

Going back, then, to our interrupted consideration of the more complex "construction" involved in the bringing of separate characters, ideas, and attitudes into the imagined contacts of developing situations, and thus, stage by stage, assembling the total conception of a novel, we see that this must be done, not only in open-minded and whole-hearted coöperation of reader with author, but with a discriminating, three-pointed criticism always ready, at the back of the reader's mind, to examine, correct, and co-relate his own

## HOW TO READ

instinctive reactions to these combinations and to their results.

Among the commonest errors of novel-reading, for example, are: For a reader to ascribe to the author the opinions of one of his characters, and to judge the author's mind or morals or character accordingly, and to read the rest of his book under the bias of that uncritical ascription. Or for a reader to criticize a character, or the author, or both, because the character acts, or fails to act, in accordance with the conventional requirements of another way of looking at things. Or for a reader to call the author a pessimist, or some other hard name, because the logical development of the adopted point of view discloses inevitable human attitudes that the reader did n't anticipate when he consented to adopt it.

And not only are these errors manifestly due to a lack of "critical" as well as "constructive" activity on the reader's part, or to criticism misapplied and ill-directed, or to a one-sided, or two-sided, instead of the required three-sided criticism of a three-sided problem, but it is also evident that any reader's final formulation of the author's complete concep-

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

tion will be discolored or actually deformed by such carelessly conducted reading.

### XVI

And this brings us to the last points we have to consider under the head of "How to Read a Novel"; namely, our real relation to *fictions as wholes*: and the importance (1) of keeping this relation in mind as we read them; (2) of employing it as a criterion of judgment when we face our completed formulations of them; and (3) of remembering it when, as we constantly do, we employ past fictional formulations as bases of other judgments and as elements in other idea and attitude constructions.

In an early chapter we spoke of one of our unconscious urges toward reading as the need, experienced by us all, of somehow creating "oases of orderliness" in the chaos of our relations to life.

And more recently we defined fiction as a contrived synthesis or appearance of completeness in the tumultuous flux and flow of the human drama that goes endlessly on within us and about us.

## HOW TO READ

And here, in a nutshell, either expressed or implied, are our real relations to novels as wholes.

We cannot, being ourselves a part of the flux of life, conceive its entirety. Nor can we conceive of the million-stranded, beginningless and endless portion of it that we do perceive, as forming in itself a completeness. All that we can do, and what by the inescapable necessity of our inborn needs we are constantly forced to do, is to keep variously cutting chaos up into sections that can, from certain points of view, be regarded as complete in themselves, and thus examine it piecemeal.

That is what physics and biology and psychology and agriculture and chemistry and astronomy — what science, in a word, is busy doing. That is what fetishism and superstition and faith and theology and morals and ethics and philosophy are at. And that, in its field, is the function of fiction; which variously uses as part of its constructive material the common activities and special attitudes of all these other decipherers of chaos.

But there is an esthetic as well as an intellectual appeal in fiction; and the novel is

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

not alone an "appearance of completeness," playful, diverting, or explanatory, presented to our understanding, but an art form—which is to say a means of at once arousing and satisfying our emotional need for self-fulfillment.

### XVII

If you will turn to the first chapter of Genesis and will read its account of God's first labors; his dividing the primal void and formlessness into light and darkness, and his placing of the sun and moon in the firmament; you will find upon reading the sentence —

And the morning and the evening were the first day

— that you experience a distinct and pleasurable satisfaction in the statement. That satisfaction is essentially an esthetic one. Your mind has found an appearance of completeness to recognize and rest upon. Moreover, if you will examine the form of this statement, you will find that no little part of your pleasure in it derives from the perfect fitness and rhythm of the words — a fitness that is a constituting element of beauty, and a rhythm

## HOW TO READ

that first helps to arouse in you an emotional anticipation, and then guides it to its fulfillment.

And here, again in a nutshell, we have the germs both of esthetic reaction and of the functioning of art.

### XVIII

The novel, then, is a contrived appearance of completeness in the chaotic drama of life; an imagined phase of that drama, more or less arbitrarily fenced off so that from a certain point of view we can regard it as complete in itself; and at the same time so constructed that it rhythmically arouses in us, and then momentarily satisfies, some inherent need of self-fulfillment.

Manifestly no reading of a novel that does not take all these facts into account, and constructively and critically coöperate in their realization, can, in the full sense, be a right reading.

And it is therefore important that, in reading a novel, we keep our real relation to fictions as wholes in mind.

Yet this involves a difficulty.

## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

We only succeed in *imagining* the phase of living that a novel presents in proportion as we achieve an illusion of its reality in reading it.

Yet if, even in the reading, we regard its ultimate "truth" as anything but relative, we risk missing its real significance to us.

Yet to the beginner, a full recognition of either of these aspects is destructive of the other.

However, the two recognitions are not incompatible. On the contrary, the more we practice the binocular vision of their coincident employment, the more will they prove to enhance our enjoyment and to cross-fertilize our intellectual and esthetic reactions to the story. But personal practice, and a persistent and interested experimenting in first alternating and then combining these ways of looking at a story, is the only rule for attaining their joint employment.

A child, suddenly recalled to the fact that a theatrical performance he is witnessing is all make-believe, has his illusions roughly destroyed and his pleasure killed. An alert and understanding onlooker at a performance

## HOW TO READ

of John Galsworthy's "The Pigeon," on the other hand, is simultaneously conscious and draws the final flavor of his appreciation from the combined realization of the play's fine illusion of reality, its purely relative "truth" as an ironic criticism of life, and the inherent art of its complexly aroused and subtly satisfied emotions. And the gap between these two attitudes, or between similar attitudes in the reading of fiction, is not to be bridged without personal interest and personal effort. Yet it is well worth bridging. And the realization that it is bridgable, the reasons for bridging it, and the advice to keep trying with these understandings in mind, are here offered as incentives to the undertaking and as directions for going about it. And the reasons for wanting to bridge the gap are that it is only by gradually doing so that we grow into a full responsiveness to fiction's many-faceted offerings to us and consequently into profiting by its many-phased ministrings to our needs. Also that failure to do this is the cause of most of our driftings into stagnation in the reading of fiction.

And to give a single yet adequate illustra-



## HOW TO READ A NOVEL

tion of this it is necessary only to point out that it is by a realization of fiction's synthetic and artistic relations to us as above outlined, and by a more and more interested reading of it with these in mind, that we gradually escape from the dwarfing tyranny of our demand for a "happy ending" into a realization that we need the self-fulfillment of imagined failure as well as that of imagined success; and that the *interpretatively valid completeness* of any fictional synthesis, and not its "happy" or "unhappy" "ending," is the ultimate source of all real intellectual profit, or esthetic pleasure, or emotional fulfillment to be derived from it.

### XIX

As to the importance of employing our ripening realization of these relationships as the criterion of our judgment when we face the completed formulation of a novel, and as to the importance of remembering these relationships and these judgments when, as we constantly do, we employ past fictional formulations as bases of other judgments on life, and as elements in other idea and attitude constructions:— the importance of these prac-

## HOW TO READ

tices and the value of gradually developing them are by now self-evident.

For, since the novel is an imaginary synthesis by means of which we at once isolate and examine our own conceptions of life and compare notes with the author, not to learn to read it as such, and judge it as such, and employ our memories of the experience as such, is to fail in learning to read. And, since the novel is also an art form; not to learn to read it, constructively aware of its rhythmic arousings of emotional anticipation, and not to learn to judge it critically by its valid or invalid satisfactions of their requirements, and not to remember and use the memory of these things for what they are, is to fail both in the flowering and the seeding of fictional right reading.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

#### I

**THERE** is a simple yet dramatic experiment in elemental physics with which we are all more or less familiar.

In it a beam of sunlight is passed through a prism and is thereby separated — like a fan that our hands have opened — into the rainbow-hued shafts of its component color rays. These are then caught upon a screen and the audience allowed to examine them — allowed to see for itself that here and no otherwhere is the magic paint-box from which the world is colored. And finally — that there may be no doubters — the experiment is proved by reversing it. The divergent rays are passed through a lens that bends them back into focused reunion; and behold, the white beam of the sunlight is itself again.

It is, in reality, a very similar experiment that we are engaged on in this book.

## HOW TO READ

We have passed our ability to read — that ability which, in these days of all but universal literacy, we have come to look upon as something almost as natural, almost as necessary, almost as much to be taken for granted at its face value, as sunlight itself — we have passed our ability to read through a prism of analysis and have separated it into the colorful factors of its component elements. We have next, so to say, thrown these elements on a screen and examined them separately. And we have discovered, to our initial surprise and to our subsequent enlightenment, that we are ourselves magic paint-boxes. We have discovered that our ability to read is made up of nothing less, and of nothing more, than of all the individual colorings, all the personal experiences, all the inborn impulses and unfolding forces of our individual lives.

And now it remains for us to prove the value of our experiment by reversing it; to reconstruct, that is to say, from the disunited elements of our ability to read and from the determined method of their proper employment, a single, illuminating entity — an attitude toward reading.

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

And the lens with which I have elected to do the necessary focusing — the phrase that I have chosen in which to sum up this attitude — is the title of this chapter.

You very likely feel that “the Cosmos *à la carte*” is a “hifalutin” phrase. It no doubt strikes some of you as — how shall I put it? — as a trifle “strong”; as “going some”; as, let us say, “a little bit of too much.” Some of you are no doubt inclined to smile and politely pass it up as hyperbole. Some of you are no doubt inclined to frown and set it down as “hot air.”

Let me be quite frank and say that I meant you to.

There is nothing like “stepping down a step that is n’t there” for making us realize the levelness of a piece of ground.

There is nothing like being certain that we have caught some one in the very act of loose-minded overstatement, and then finding that he is, after all, well within the facts, for jolting us into a recognition of neglected truth.

And this phrase is n’t “hifalutin.” It is n’t hyperbolic. It is n’t “hot air.” It is merely a slightly fanciful way of calling attention to

## HOW TO READ

the most basic, the most primal, the most universally operative attitude of all life.

If you doubt this, allow me to introduce you to one of our poorest relations and most distant cousins, the amoeba.

### II

The amoeba, as you doubtless know, is one of the protozoa — one of the first, or lowest, forms of life. It is an invisible pellicule of protoplasm; a microscopic animalcule consisting of a single life-cell. It has no mouth, no stomach, no sense-organs, no limbs. It lives in the sea and it moves from place to place by occasionally protruding portions of its jelly-like substance and sculling with these temporary fins. And when, on its tiny journeys, it encounters bits of floating matter smaller than itself, it wraps its soft cell-stuff round them, — engulfs these microscopic atoms in its own microscopic mass, — and either absorbs them, if they prove absorbable, or rejects them if they don't. And this — except occasionally to divide itself in two and thus double the size of its own family — is all that it ever does.

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

Here, then, on the lowest rung of the ladder of life, here, still lingering at the source from which we have all derived, is a literal and living embodiment of my "hifalutin" phrase. For the amoeba's sole attitude toward the cosmos is that the cosmos is edible. And it spends its life making experiments with the menu.

### III

"But what," you may perhaps ask, "has this to do with reading?"

The proper and final answer to that question is "Everything." But first, let us move a few million years up the scale of development.

Did you ever notice that a human baby, when it arrives "trailing clouds of glory behind it," also brings along *the amoeba attitude toward the cosmos*? That it, too, regards the universe solely as edible, and conveys every fragment of it that its little hands get hold of to its mouth?

Let us see how this happens and what it means.

Millions of years separate Man as we know him — Man with his complex physical organ-

## HOW TO READ

ization and his developed mentality — from the one-celled creatures that were his earliest ancestors. But the individual human baby is not thus separated. The individual baby, newly born, is but a few short months removed from having been a microscopic, one-celled organism itself. Moreover, in those few months, it has physically rehearsed (like a scholar, who reviews in a day the lessons of a term) the whole physical history of the race's climb. It has been in turn a two-celled, a four-celled, an eight-celled organism. It has been the cup-shaped cell-mass that corresponds to a sponge. It has been a worm-like creature with a pulsing tube for a heart. It has been a fish-like being and breathed through gills. It has had the two-chambered heart of a fish, and the three-chambered heart of a frog, before it developed the four-chambered heart of a mammal. It has been a "quadruped" with four limbs alike. It has worn hair from head to heel. It has grown, and discarded, a long tail.

And even when it is born, it is not yet, except in intention and promise, a human being. It is still merely a creature on the road to becoming human — a creature that has already



## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

developed the body of a baby, but that still retains the mind of an amoeba.

On the physical side, the long recapitulatory journey from protozoon to man is well advanced. But on the psychic side the journey is not yet begun. The entire development from "amoeba attitude" to "man attitude" remains to be carried out. *All the marvelous overtones of Man's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual appetites have still to be evolved from, and superimposed on, the basic hunger of the protozoon.*

### IV

Do you doubt the possibility of this transition?

Did you ever watch a baby a few days old nuzzle at its mother's breast, and then fall asleep in the very act of suckling — at the instant, that is to say, of achieved satisfaction? And did you ever watch the same baby, a few weeks later, although its hunger had been sated, fret for its mother's lullaby; and then fall asleep, suddenly, in the middle of a rhythm?

If you have, you have watched one of the

## HOW TO READ

many beginnings of that other recapitulatory journey — the journey from physical hunger to mental appetites.

For this latter falling to sleep also marks the instant of an achieved satisfaction. A satisfaction still physical, but no longer gastric. The satisfaction of what is, as yet, a mere faint bodily appetite; but which will, some day, develop into a spiritual hunger.

For what has happened is this: the baby (not being deaf, like the imagined "Helen Keller" of our discussion of "The World Outside Us and the World Within") has sensed a relationship, other than that of food and hunger, between the world outside it and its inner life. It has sensed the relationship between the physical rhythm of its mother's song, and the physical rhythms of its own body; the rhythms of its beating heart, its pulsing arteries, its expanding and contracting lungs, its breath alternately intaken and exhaled. And where, awhile ago, it was content and fell asleep when it had hungered and been fed, it now instinctively craves and clamors for a periodic renewal of this other, *comfortable sensing*; and sleeps when that is sated.

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

It has discovered a new dish on the cosmic menu.

It has, let us put it, sensed something in the world outside it, that is not food, and that yet, somehow, *belongs to it*.

And have we not already, in the course of our previous inquiry, seen a child, a little further advanced on this journey, — “the inhabitant,” we then described it, “of a world where there was already rhyme, but not yet reason,” — reading Mother Goose with a satisfaction that was not wholly physical, yet not wholly mental; and discovering in the process *something that was its own* — “finding itself” as we said?

Have we not, indeed, already, in our seeking for a Sense of Direction, followed one phase of this journey up through childhood and adolescence to the final culmination of maturity; and found, at every stage, — from the rhymes of Mother Goose to the gospels of the elect, — that the travelers were but discovering their own; formulating what belonged to them; “finding,” as we said, “themselves”?

It is the universal impetus — this search for our own.

## HOW TO READ

It is the essence of that upward urge that has immemorially driven our race; that has driven it from being "amoebas" into being men; that will yet drive it into being what no man can now foresee.

Not merely in metaphor, but in biologic fact, the acts and attitudes that we speak of as "drinking in beauty," as "having an omnivorous mind," as "hungering and thirsting after righteousness," are sublimated forms of the primal hunger. They are subtler *searchings for our own* on the menu of a Cosmos *à la carte*.

In short, this search is the Law of Life.

And it is also the focus-giving fact that we are seeking.

For, since reading, as we have seen, is a form of living, we can best state our right attitude toward it in terms of Life-law. And so, in order to get our definition of that attitude into a concrete form that we can examine and adjust ourselves to, we will put it that **READING SHOULD BE A ZESTFUL, CONSCIOUS, DISCRIMINATING SEARCH FOR OUR OWN.**

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

### V

Do you remember that, in our early discussions, when we discovered that we have to find our own materials in which to retell for ourselves an author's story, and that we even have to find our own meanings for the words in which the story is written, we discovered that we do not always find the right word-meaning first? That we "react automatically" to words and then criticize the reactions?

And do you remember that it was there pointed out that this method — to feel first, and then examine our feelings; to react spontaneously to life, and then accept or reject the reactions — is the only method we have of finding personal meanings, whether for words or for the world?

And do you remember that it was further pointed out, there and thereafter, that the understanding of these facts and the employment of this method are the only sources of genuine cultural growth and attainment?

Please note, then, that this method is the method of the *amoeba*, which first engulfs its atom, and then either absorbs or rejects it.

## HOW TO READ

It is the ancestral method. By it, and by it only, can we discriminate our own, anywhere in life. And by it, and by it only, can we make that, which should be our own, ours. Please note, also, that our friend George — he of the cold-storage mind — does not use this method. He engulfs as many atoms as he can hold; but neither absorbs, nor rejects, any. He is the kind of reader that Lord Bacon must have had in mind when he said that “reading maketh a full man.” He mistakes the Cosmos for a *table d’hôte*.

### VI

But we are adopting a very different attitude; and our discussion of “Intellectual Digestion” in the seventh chapter was really undertaken in order to lay the foundation for a proper understanding, at this point, (1) of the true nature of this reading-search for our own, and (2) of the way we can best translate this understanding into efficient practice. For not *everything* in *any* book “belongs to us.” And, of what does, only so much is ever actually made ours through reading as we intellectually digest, in addition to mentally engulfing.

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

Let us now look, then, with this in mind, at a few obvious facts of reading, the meaning of which we seldom seek for.

There are many books in every department (and there are few of us who have not had some experience with them) that we read, with fresh profit, at successive stages of our development; books in which, at each rereading, we find something *now* "belonging to us" that was not even *potentially* "ours" before.

Sometimes this is because we have, in the mean while, acquired the necessary raw materials of experience with which to read these books more fully.

Sometimes this is merely because, in the mean while, we have developed new skill in the right using of our old material.

Sometimes it is because, in the mean while, we have developed *new needs* that were dormant in our younger selves.

But, generally speaking, these new discoveries, in books that we have already read, of things that are potentially ours, and these new successes at making them so, are the outcome of all three of these causes combined in various proportions.

## HOW TO READ

Again, there are many books in every department (and again there are few of us who have not had some experience with them) that we read once with conscious enjoyment or personal profit; but of which a later reading leaves us puzzled to understand "what we ever saw in them."

Sometimes this is because, at our first reading, they synthesized certain portions of experience for us (and these syntheses may be either the explanatory ones of elementary science or the imaginative ones of simple-minded fiction) that we now know our way through blindfold, and so no longer realize the sense of rightful ownership we felt in our first finding of them thus simply grouped.

Sometimes this is because, while in our first reading we found these books adequate moulds into which to pour some inchoate hope or dream or tentative realization of relationship, fictional, philosophical, historical, or what-not, the fuller store of our later mould-needing material finds them inadequate to its purposes, and we forget their former adequacy.

Sometimes this is because, at our first read-



## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

ing, these books ministered to a typical but temporary need — childish, adolescent, or developmental — that we have since outgrown, have perhaps forgotten, and have even possibly come, while remembering, to despise.

But again, generally speaking, all of these reasons are present in varying proportions when we thus discover that a book, once seemingly full of what by right belonged to us, is now comparatively empty, wholly worthless, or even despicable.

And a proper balancing against each other of these two sets of facts from our common reading experience will go far toward making clear to us the true meaning, both of what progressively and changingly constitutes “our own,” and of the step-by-step methods of our only efficient search for it.

### VII

Even Science and Philosophy, we must remember, constantly invent explanations and hypotheses; find them useful while they cover, and seem to co-relate, all the facts till then observed in a particular field; swear by them more or less dogmatically while maintained;

## HOW TO READ

use them as stepping-stones to new investigations and as tests of new discoveries; end by discarding them when outgrown and discredited, and frequently look back upon them with contempt.

And this is but another way of expressing the use we have made of those books once found full of meaning, but later discovered to be empty.

And even Science and Philosophy, those great, organized, supposedly authoritative forms of humanity's search for its own in the chaos of experience, are constantly going back and discovering that their own growth has enabled them to find new meanings and new mysteries in chapters of the Great Book that they had already read and had thought to have read fully.

And this is but another way of expressing the fresh discoveries we make in old books whose real "conceptions" were bigger than our first formulations of them.

### VIII

But what the Science, and the Philosophy, and the You and the I of any particular mo-

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

ment are all prone to lose sight of, is the fact that it is partly with the actually digested and assimilated essences of these old and perhaps exploded explanations, of these old and perhaps abandoned hypotheses, of these old and perhaps now despicable "readings," that they, and we, in our respective fields, are now pursuing our enlarging search.

Thus the chemist of to-day is thinking in part with the truths digested out of the crude syntheses of alchemy.

Thus the idealist of to-day is more beholden than he sometimes likes to acknowledge to those who first made idols and worshiped them. For the idol was the wooden synthesis of a crude idealism; and in the higher truth of all human worship there circulates to-day some transubstantiated essence of the idolater's gropings after truth.

Thus John Smith, formulating for himself (in reading W. H. Hudson's romance of Central America, "Green Mansions") a new synthesis of relations between the naïve brutalities of savage life, the scientific marvels of nature-study, and the basic yearnings of the human heart, may unwittingly be building

## HOW TO READ

into his creative structure something of what he first wonderingly found and made his own in reading that once gladly accepted, but now ridiculous-seeming "appearance of completeness," Mayne Reid's "Afloat in the Forest."

### IX

Our minds, it seems, like our bodies, grow by what they feed on. But, like our bodies, our minds do not grow by means of the containing husks and form-giving fibers that in time they digestively reject, but by whatever of the nutritive contents of these they assimilate and make their own.

And now, with this idea also in mind, let us again look at some of the obvious facts of our common reading experience.

One may read a volume on science, or an essay upon some philosophical conception, and be so poorly equipped with technical knowledge that one does little more, in the reading, than formulate for one's self a vague idea — the hazy conception of a point of view bigger than one's own.

Later on, one may come to discard this idea

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

as fallacious, or arrive at regarding this point of view as dwarfing.

And yet, meanwhile, they may have functioned for us — these experimental syntheses — as incentives to further searchings, as disclosers of new possibilities, as touchstones and criteria of “ownership.”

On the other hand, one may read such a book and be utterly incapable of grasping the synthetic idea contained in it; yet may incidentally formulate for one's self, in reading it, a dozen subsidiary realizations of fact-relationship or idea-relationship that one uses thereafter as building-blocks in future formulations; that one gradually combines with other similar realizations, the personal meanings of which one slowly and digestively assimilates into one's attitude toward the world.

And the same thing is true of fiction.

One may read a story and get little from reading it beyond the vividly emotionalized facing of a situation; or the eager, “I-told-you-so” notion of a proved moral; or a sense of violent antipathy to “that way of looking at things.”

And one may — indeed, one must — use

## HOW TO READ

these hazy findings of what belongs to one as parts of one's future equipment.

But, on the other hand, one may read a novel and discover no *wholeness* to it at all; yet have a dozen things "happen in one" in the course of the reading that prove, later, to have been true "findings of one's own."

And of course the same thing is true of a history, an autobiography, a religious treatise, or any other printed invitation to compare notes on life, past, present, or to come.

### X

All our reading, then, no matter how unskillful or how unsophisticated it may be, proves on examination to be eclectic.

And we see, moreover, that this eclecticism, even when unconscious and undirected, is exercised in two typical manners: (1) it seizes upon, and makes future use of, the synthetic aspects of the book read; or (2) it seizes upon, and makes future use of, component details used by the author in his attempted synthesis. Or it does both.

And the efficient application to practice of our defined attitude toward reading must

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

therefore be sought through a *gradual developing in ourselves of a more conscious, zestful, and discriminating eclecticism*: — an eclecticism eager for the discovery, in everything we read, of “our own” in *either of these forms*; and an eclecticism progressively able and willing to accept either, at its full value, without prejudice to the other, while at the same time looking hopefully for the greater discovery of their complete combining. Such a combining, for instance, as comes to us when a great novel helps us to build the disregarded facts of our common lives, the partial philosophies of our daily using, the accepted “science” of our passing civilization, into successively revealing syntheses of understanding, and finally welds these rhythmically assembled parts into the interpretative “completeness” of an outlook, and at the same time leads our art-roused sense of “need” to an art-achieved fulfillment. Or such a combining, again, as one may find in the writings of the French entomologist, Henri Fabre. Fabre had the scientist’s passion for truth, the unassuming culture of the scholar, the unifying imagination of the poet, the dramatist’s sense of the tragic

## HOW TO READ

and mysterious, the outlook of the philosopher and the creativeness of the artist. His books are about bugs. But their insect actors cast shadows on the stars.

### XI

But there is a reverse side to every medal. And besides developing a more open-minded and receptive and discriminating eclecticism in the realm of what really belongs to us, we need also to discourage — at least to the extent of recognizing its true character — another kind of eclecticism that we all practice more or less unintelligently in the realm of what, in the strictest sense, does not as yet belong to us.

And here again our seventh chapter inquiry into the matter of Intellectual Digestion will help us to an easier understanding.

The mere acceptance — the “swallowing whole” — of statements of alleged fact, no matter how trustworthy, or of pronounced opinions, no matter how “authoritative,” may stock our memories with useful material — useful for certain experiments, or as points of departure for future inquiry, or as subject-



## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

matter for future testing-out. But, so far from such mere acceptance making these things "ours," it frequently results in preventing our ever discovering in them that which should by rights belong to us.

If, for example, in the exercise of this bastard eclecticism, one uncritically accepts as personally and *finally* valid the orders of some critic, or specialist, or teacher (no matter how celebrated) as to what we must think of a picture, or what we must find in a book, or how we must regard some political theory, or what we must believe in religion, one closes by that supine act of acceptance the only door that opens into real "ownership" in that particular synthesis of recognizable relationship.

"But," many readers are likely to exclaim at this point, "are we not to accept, then, as valid, the declaration of Science that it is so and so many million miles to the sun; that so much oxygen and so much hydrogen, properly combined, form water; and all the thousands of other authoritative declarations about things that we need to know, but have no chance to find out for ourselves?" And the answer to this question is very simple, for the

## HOW TO READ

question has to do with a difficulty that is really only a confusion. The fact being that we accept the statements of others only in so far, and for so long, as their truth does not personally concern us.

Science tells us that it is ninety-four million miles to the sun; and we accept the statement humbly and gratefully and admiringly.

Later on, Science comes round and says that it is sorry, but it finds that it has made a mistake. It is only ninety-two and a half million miles to the sun. And we accept the new statement just as readily and as humbly as the first. But the real reason for this is that the only personal use we make of this "knowledge" is to use the supposed distance to the sun as a means of trying to conceive the distances of inter-stellar space; and for this purpose one of these distances is as useful as the other.

Again, Science tells us to-day that under certain circumstances two atoms of oxygen and one of hydrogen will rush joyously together and form a molecule of water; and that under other circumstances these same atoms will find each other's company unsupportable and

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

will rush apart and resume their original status. And we accept the statement, humble and marveling. But if, to-morrow, Science came round and told us that it was sorry, but it found that it had overlooked something; namely, that it was only when a little radium was present, — say an eightieth of a grain in a gallon of water, — that these things ever happened, we should accept the new statement as complacently as the first; and should continue to discriminate just as eclectically as before between the bottled waters offered us by the Undine Spring Company and the Hygienic Distilling Corporation. For the truth is that the only personal use most of us ever make of the statements of Science about the composition of water is to use them as imaginative items in our building-up of a conception of the marvelously intricate nature of matter, of the almost human loves and hates and liaisons and fallings-out of “chemical affinity,” and of the relations these bear to modern industry and modern thought. And for this purpose one of these statements is as serviceable as the other.

But suppose one was a manufacturing

## HOW TO READ

chemist, excited by the new declaration because it suggested the possibility of his extracting radium from Lake Michigan. Do you imagine for a moment that he would accept the new declaration without personal investigation? Or build a plant until he had digested out of that investigation's results the "personal meanings" of the discovery?

But enough of Science. Let us come down to the practical plane of household practice. You get, let us say, your bread from a baker. But in glancing over the pages of Mrs. Roastem's cookbook, you come upon the statement that four eggs are the proper number to use in making corn muffins. If Mrs. Roastem is your favorite authority, you accept the statement unconditionally, and even pass the information on to inquiring friends, rather proud that the corner of Authority's mantle should thus for a moment rest on your shoulder. And if, next year, a new edition of Mrs. Roastem's book advises three eggs instead of four, you accept the revision without question, and perhaps even boast to your advisees that Mrs. R. has found a way of making muffins with three eggs.

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

But suppose that you make up your mind to try your own hand at making corn muffins. Which authority finally determines for you what is "your own" in that recipe — Mrs. Roastem, or your palate and your digestion?

### XII

There are, as a matter of fact, but three services, broadly speaking, that any teacher or expounder or commentator or critic can render us.

One of these is the important and necessary, but none-the-less humble, service of supplying our memories with storable raw materials of alleged "facts," of supposed relationships, and of the existence of this, that, or the other decision about these, arrived at by this, that, or the other investigator.

The other two services are of a higher order; of opposed but mutually complementary character, and hence of equal value.

One of them is to help us (by inducing us constructively and critically to agree with them) to a more intelligent synthetic formulation of our own reactions to life.

The other is to help us (by inducing us

## HOW TO READ

constructively and critically to disagree with them) to more intelligent syntheses of these same personal reactions.

And there is no more fatal bar to the progressive and successful reduction to practice of our accepted attitude toward reading than habitually to allow the first of these author services to take for us the place of the other two.

### XIII

One might fill a book with examples of the emotional and intellectual and spiritual lanes-leading-to-our-own that are blocked and turned into no-thoroughfares for us by this practice.

But one common and typical instance will suffice — an instance so common that we constantly see examples of it; and so typical that we should always regard them as final reductions-to-absurdity of the idea that we do not need to *seek* our own, or to digest it out of what we find, but can rest content in being told by another what it is.

We all know people who will read a book in the firm conviction that they are getting a

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

great deal out of it, and who, in that conviction, voraciously "swallow whole" all its statements, opinions, theories, and explanations; but who, if they chance upon some declaration in it that they know of their own knowledge to be inaccurate, will "unswallow" everything they had taken in (which, having digested none of it, they are able to do) and will toss the book aside, declaring that "if it is wrong in *that* it may be wrong in everything" and that it is of no further use to them, since they no longer know "what to believe and what not to."

These are the people who, a few generations since, ceased to believe in God when they began to believe in Darwin.

And the root of their trouble — and of ours, since it is a trouble from which none of us is free — lies in the fact that they have not yet even begun to learn the thing that none of us has wholly learned; namely, that, while understanding and faith must both feed on external things, they must both be *generated* within us.

## HOW TO READ

### XIV

Understanding and faith: These are the two forms that all our successful seekings for our own take on. They are equally changeable and fallible. They are equally subject to the laws of growth by digestion and assimilation. They are equally incapable of reaching "ultimate truth." Yet they are the equal and final storehouses of the harvest of living.

All that is significant to the seer in his "attitude toward the Cosmos" and toward the unknowable Power that stands behind it or pervades it, is summed up in these two terms. And all that is significant to the miser, gloating on the dulling dollars in an old hair trunk, is similarly to be summed up.

And since, while generated within us, understanding and faith both feed on external things, — on the concreteness of our own contacts with life and on such comparings of notes as we are able to carry on with our fellows, — the homely problem of the "balanced ration" enters into all our dealings with their nourishment.

We have already seen that our own con-



## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

crete contacts with life and our own germinal "ideas" derived therefrom are the basic raw materials of our reading. We have already seen that it is in part with such increments of understanding and faith as we digest out of our old reading that we carry on our new. And we must not forget that these new readings must, taken together with our new living, constitute in some sort a "balanced ration," if the understanding and faith we build from them are to be sound and serviceable.

We cannot practice to the full the right reading of modern fiction if we are utterly ignorant of modern thought. We cannot practice to the full the right reading of even the simplest conceptions of modern thought if we are utterly ignorant of modern science. We cannot bring to the reading of the simplest scientific textbook the "curiosity" that furnishes the motive power of our reading if we walk the modern world without something of that will to inquire into its phenomena that every child possesses.

Right reading is not a trick. It is a structure. It is built up from the digested satisfactions of a myriad curiosities — curiosities from

## HOW TO READ

which, on the one hand, its materials are derived, and from which, on the other, its methods are assembled, like the growing formulation of a novel's conception. And its aim is an efficient readiness and ability, based on practice and experiment, to make imaginative combinations of this material at the instigation of the author, in the zestful seeking for what these may disclose in, and for, ourselves.

Perhaps you are one of those who have kept hanging up, in your heart, a motto, worked in mental worsted on a bit of intellectual bristol board — a motto reading "Live, and let live." If so, and if you would learn right reading, take this motto down and hang up in its place one with the inscription, "Live, and compare notes." And then, when you are "reading your book," remember George of the cold-storage mind, and remember the *amœba*.

Is there a simile in the sentence before you? Engulf it. Test yourself quickly with it for anything that it may disclose to, or in, or for, you, either of beauty or of meaning or of humor. Absorb what you find; or toss the empty husk of words aside, and pass on. Is there a statement in a paragraph? A moral

## THE COSMOS À LA CARTE

implication in an incident? A criticism of life implicit in a tale? An "outlook" in an outcome? An esthetic stimulus in a style? An art-enhancement in a writer's creation? Engulf them. Taste them. Test them by, and for, yourself. Smack your mind's lips over them; or make a wry face, and pass on.

When, and only when, you are doing this, are you really reading — seeking your own with a zestful and discriminating eclecticism.

And when you *are* doing this, you are, like the amoeba, taking your Cosmos *à la carte*.

THE END



